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TRAVEL | HAWAII

Hawaii residents outraged by private road signs posted by famed black sand beach



Endangered sea turtles relaxing on Punaluu black sand beach on the island of Hawaii.
MNStudio/Getty Images/iStockphoto

By **Christine Hitt**, *Hawaii Contributing Editor*

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Hawaii residents' fight against development at famous black sand beach escalates

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At one of Hawaii's famous black sand beaches in Punaluu, the fight between Hawaii residents and the Punaluu Village developer continues on the southeast side of the island of Hawaii.

In 2020, the developer Black Sand Beach LLC bought 434 acres of land. The proposed development, Punaluu Village, would add 225 residential and short-stay units, a wellness center and dining and retail establishments "approximately a quarter mile from the shoreline." Last year, many people testified against the development as the developer applied for a required county permit, which is currently on hold.

But now there are additional complaints of "private road" signs being installed and increased water rates. Locals are also worried that Punaluu Black Sand Beach Park will close.

"The issue is the people of Kau [district] do not want any kind of development down in Punaluu. We would love to keep the place country, free from development, and keep it like it is because this is kind of the last frontier for any kind of untouched place, so to speak," 70-year-old Guy Enriques, who was born and raised in Punaluu, told SFGATE. "Ever since I can remember, that county park was a county park, so it's really the people's park, and I don't think people gonna stand for it."

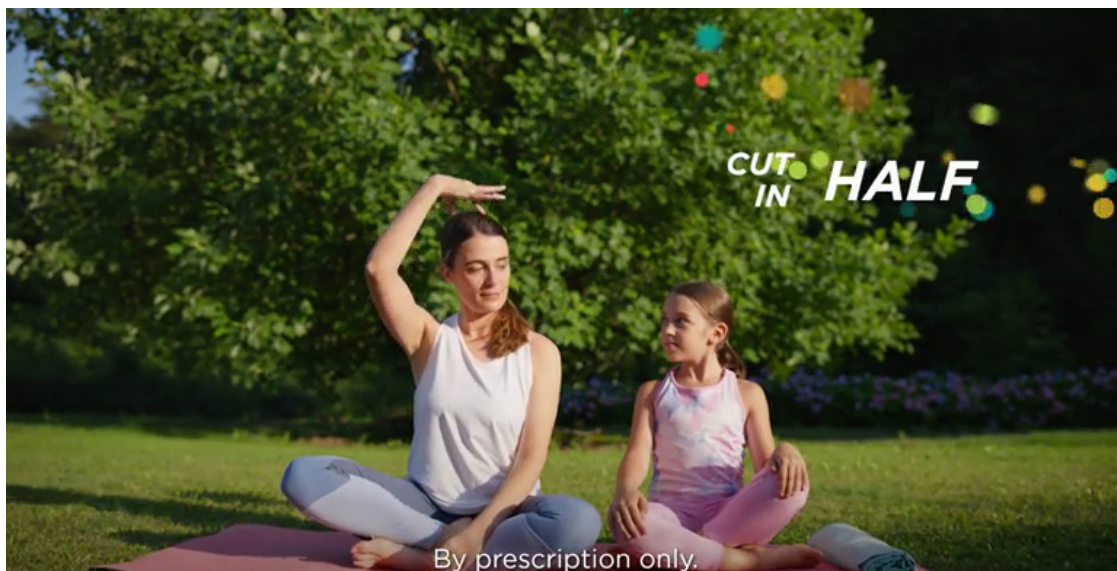
Enriques helped organize a roadside rally in Punaluu last month with about 100 residents to oppose development and any blocked beach access. "The rally is about trying to show that the developer and any kind of investor who might think about trying to invest in this, that they're going to be in for a battle," he said. "One of our signs that we posted up is that, 'You buy the land, you get the people.' The people and the land are one, and the people don't want any more resorts. They have enough in Kona."

Enriques said the developer put up 12 "private road" signs on the main road leading to the beach, stating no parking, no trespassing and no access. "Realistically, it was like not allowing anybody on the beach," Enriques said. "It was utterly ridiculous."

He said the signs stayed up for three days. "The second day, somebody, they went to Safeway and got Safeway paper bags and they put it over the signs," Enriques said. On the third day, the signs were completely gone.



Black Sand Beach design plans of Punaluu Village, a residential and commercial village.
County of Hawaii Planning Department



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"It's just another example of this developer saying one thing and then doing the exact opposite when it suits them, and limiting public access to really one of the only beaches on that coastline, a place that's super important to Hawaiian traditional and customary practices ... It's another slap in the face to the community, and I think enough is enough," Maxx Phillips, the Hawaii director and staff attorney for the Center for Biological

Diversity, told SFGATE. The nonprofit is made up of environmental attorneys and scientists who are dedicated to preserving native species and their habitats.

SFGATE reached out to Black Sand Beach LLC and did not receive a response in time for this story.

When Black Sand Beach LLC submitted its application for a Special Management Area permit, which is required for development projects in a coastal zone, the Center for Biological Diversity in March 2024 challenged the permit with a contested case. Development can't move forward until the contested case hearing is concluded, and though it's been several months since that request was made, Phillips said they're not in any hurry.

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At Punaluu's black-sand beach, turtles are often seen basking in the sun.
Jeanne Cooper

A spokesperson from the Hawaii County Mayor's Office confirmed to SFGATE that the next step is either a contested case hearing or the developer withdrawing its application for the permit.

Hawaii County, which leases the Punaluu Black Sand Beach Park land from the developer for \$1 per year, also denied that the park is at risk of closing. "The current lease goes until Nov. 27, 2025, and we have not received any notice that the lease will be terminated or that we would not be able to continue extending it," a spokesperson from the Hawaii County's Mayor's Office told SFGATE in an email.

Meanwhile, the Black Sand Beach LLC is at risk of foreclosure on its mortgages, according to a lawsuit filed in February. Through its company Punaluu Water and Sanitation LLC, it also wants to increase rates for Punaluu customers.

"It appears that the developer has come under additional financial hardships," said Phillips. "In fact, they just put in an application with the Public Utility Commission requesting a temporary rate increase because this developer also owns the water system for Punaluu, so they're asking for a 30% rate increase, and we have intervened into that case as well."

Enriques said he will plan more rallies if he hears any other investors are returning to Punaluu. It's not the first time he has seen developers buy the land and try to build and then fail. "I would like to see, you know, a nonprofit come in and buy the place and put it in conservation," Enriques said. "... But I'm hoping to put an end to this, so that my kids don't have to worry about having to fight for, you know, keep it country, to keep it like it is."

Editor's note: SFGATE recognizes the importance of diacritical marks in the Hawaiian language. We are unable to use them due to the limitations of our publishing platform.

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