

South Kohala Community Development Plan
PUAKŌ PLAN
SUMMARY BACKGROUND DATA – January 5, 2008
By: AC/Townscape

PURPOSE: To present preliminary thoughts and identify priority needs on an “Action Plan” for the Puakō community. This preliminary draft working paper will be submitted to the Puakō Focus Group for review, and discussion as well as submitted to the South Kohala Steering Committee. As the name suggests this is a working document and should be used as a tool for gathering ideas, identifying issues and presenting plans for the community.

SOURCES: The information and ideas in this Working Paper came from: (1) The Puakō Focus Group meetings of November 7, 2007, (2) the draft “South Kohala Community Profile” developed by Townscape during the period of June – September 2007, and (3) Follow-up research and consultation with various stakeholders.

2.0 SUMMARY OF THE PLANNING AREA

2.1 HISTORY

Anthropologists and archaeologists estimate that the first settlers arrived in the South Kohala region sometime between 750-1000 AD. (Clark,1986) The warm coast and beaches on the western boundaries of the South Kohala district were used seasonally by early Polynesians who eventually migrated onto the cooler plateau. Descendents of these early Polynesian explorers established fishing villages on the leeward coast of the district and along the western extremities of the plains and began cultivating lo`i kalo terraces along a series of streams at the southern base of the Kohala Mountains. In legends and historical accounts, the white sandy beaches of South Kohala were used for canoe landings. Arriving from Kauai, Madame Pele beached her canoe at Puakō. The demi-god Maui also used Puakō as a canoe landing as he was visiting the island during his love affair with Pele. (Puakō Historical Society, 2000)

In 1832 at 24 years of age, Lorenzo Lyons and his 18 year-old wife Betsy Lyons arrived in

Kawaihae. He is credited with translating many church hymns into Hawaiian and also for composing hymns in Hawaiian as well. He was adoringly known by local folks as Makua Laiana (Father Lyons), the lyric poet of the mountain country (haku mele o ka'aina mauna). Many of the historical accounts in the region come from the journal entries of Father Lyons. Father Lyons also established a church in Puakō in 1858. The church, named Hokuloa, means "evening star." (Puakō Historical Society, 2000) The church is still in regular use to this day and it also serves as a meeting place for the Puakō Community Association.

In 1853, there was a major outbreak of small pox that spread from Waimea to Kawaihae and down towards Puakō. Famine and food shortages in the area also contributed to the decline in population. Also, more promising economic opportunities on O'ahu and in other larger towns across the islands led many of the native population in the region who did survive the outbreaks, to migrate out of the region. (Clark, 1986) In 1859, Mauna Loa erupted and lava from the eruption flowed 25 miles into the ocean along the Kona coast. Although the lava did not flow through South Kohala, the Mauna Loa eruption had a negative effect on the coastal resources of all villages along the Kona coast because of the rise in ocean temperatures that the lava flow caused. From Puakō, Father Lyons comments on the effect the lava flow had on the tiny coastal village, "The heat of the volcanic stream that entered the sea near this place from [Mauna Loa] have killed or frightened away all their fish." (Puakō Historical Society, 2000)

In 1895, the Puakō Sugar Plantation was established by Robert and John Hind. The plantation included 1,500-1,800 acres of land located east of the present Puakō Beach Drive where the present kiawe forest is located. Investment in the plantation included construction of a sugar mill, a wharf, and even a small one-mile railroad track running from the mill to the wharf. However, due to a combination of many factors, including a flood in 1901, and several instances of severe high coastal winds which blew down crops and scattered salt into the soils, the life of the sugar plantation was short-lived. The Puakō Sugar Plantation closed after only being in operation for about a decade and a half. Only seven families remained in the area after the plantation's closure. (Puakō Historical Society, 2000)

During the early 1930s Francis Hyde I'i Brown acquired land just south of Puakō from the Parker family. The area is known as Kalahupua'a. Brown was of Hawaiian ancestry and he cared deeply about the land. He made several notable improvements to the area including planting several hundred coconut palms and did some restoration work on the fishponds in the area. Brown was also remembered for his many "Hollywood" like parties that lasted for days and sometimes even weeks. Everyone was invited to his parties, local community members and even visiting Hollywood celebrities. Brown eventually sold the property to Mauna Lani Resort in 1972. (Puakō Historical Society, 2000)

In 1946, coastal communities in South Kohala were witness to a devastating tsunami. At Kawaihae, the tsunami was measured at 12 feet. In Puakō, coconut palms were reported to have watermarks on their trunks eight feet high. A long time Puakō resident, Ichiro Goto gave an account of the tsunami in his journal:

"Puakō Bay was empty for just a minute or two before another wave comes in like some unearthly monster. Roaring like a group of heavy bombers the wave comes in like some wild thing. Pushing rocks, fish, debris, everything and filling every space, and after the spaces are filled looks like some giant hand is pushing the wave up and above to a greater height." (Puakō Historical Society, 2000)

In 1964, Shunichi Kimura, the County's first elected mayor, oversaw the completion of a paved road that connected Kawaihae and Puakō. Almost a decade later in 1975, the Queen Ka'ahumanu Hwy. was completed. The new highway ran from the Keāhole Airport to Kawaihae Harbor. Prior to the highway's completion, all vehicular traffic going between East and West Hawai'i had to pass through Waimea. The highway opened up access to this side of the island from the south. The highway also connected the major coastal towns in West Hawai'i and is one of the major infrastructure improvements to the region that helped to generate the large amount of future development. (Puakō Historical Society, 2000)

In 1987, a large brush fire occurred in the district near Puakō. The fire was accidentally caused by campers at Waialea Bay. Strong winds had blown their camp fire onto dry fountain grass nearby. The fire spread rapidly toward houses around the bay because of

the strong winds. The main blaze lasted for two days, totally destroying seven houses and causing millions of dollars in property damages. (Puakō Historical Society, 2000) Exactly 20 years later in October of 2007, another large brush threatened the residents of Puakō. Unlike the previous fires, this fire was thought to have been purposely set by arsonists. The fire consumed approximately 1,000 acres near Puakō and seriously threatened the Puakō Kiawe forest. Residents of Puakō were evacuated, but luckily no lives or properties were damaged.

2.2 EXISTING CONDITIONS

Puakō is a small coastal community located along the northwest coast of the Big Island in the South Kohala District. Puakō has a dry desert like climate, receiving less than 10 inches of rain per year. The high mean temperature is between 83-87 degrees Fahrenheit and a low mean temperature between 70-75 degrees Fahrenheit.

The community consists mainly of single-family residential housing that runs along either side of Puakō Beach Drive. There is one store in the community, the Puakō store is central to the area and serves as a meeting place during wild fires and a place of information sharing. The coastline bordering Puakō is home to an extensive coral reef system while the dry lowlands to the east are the home to an expansive Kiawe forest. The northern end of the community is bordered by Hapuna Beach State Recreation Area, while the south is home to the Mauna Lani Resort Development. Puakō also contains several cultural and historical sites, such as the Puakō petroglyph field as well as the Hokuloa Church.

The waters off of Puakō receive more than 3.0 MGD of freshwater discharge per coastal mile. (Puakō Kiawe Forest EA, 2004) The source of the freshwater discharge into the ocean is from groundwater. Near shore waters have been reported to have a high inorganic nitrogen concentration. However, despite the high inorganic nitrogen concentration, the near shore reefs are in fairly good condition. Puakō is regarded as one of the best spots for diving on the entire island because of the varied marine life and unique lava rock formations.

In addition to its marine and coastal resources, another major natural resource unique to Puakō is an underground aquifer that has given rise to a dense kiawe forest. The Puakō

Kiawe Forest is very lush and productive. The underground aquifer has allowed the kiawe trees to grow to 60 ft. in height. By comparison, average kiawe trees are only 15 ft. in height. The underground aquifer is regarded by some as a “natural oasis in a desert like climate.” These large kiawe trees produce flowers heavy with nectar. Subsequently, a small bee-keeping company, has produced internationally known gourmet quality honey.

North of Puakō is are residential homes by Wailea Bay and the Hapuna State Recreational Area. The State Recreational Area includes several beaches including Hapuna Beach and Beach 69. Local residents, residents from around the whole island, and tourist frequent these beaches making these beaches some of the most popular and crowded beaches on the island.

2.3 MAJOR TRENDS

Population figures for Puakō were not kept until the 1990 U.S. Census. In 1990, the population of Puakō was 397 people and by 2000 it was up to 429 people. Of that resident population 84% or 362 of the residents are 25 years or older. There are just over 700 housing units however, only 215 are occupied while 487 are considered vacant. The residents of Puako are mostly retirees and second home owners; and the families in the community that do work commute to their jobs in Waimea or the various resorts found in South Kohala.

Major developments

Within the core community of Puakō along Puakō Beach Drive, there is little if not no room for major development. However, there are several large developments outside of the core community that may have a significant impact on Puakō. Bridge ‘Āina Le’a, a development on the mauka side of Queen Ka’ahumanu Highway almost directly across from Puakō, has proposed to develop 4,132 residences, five golf courses, golf academy, commercial villages, and a 40-unit resort lodge on 3,000 acres.

Another major development, the Stanford Carr Development is planning to develop 691 residential units, 284 hotel unit, and three golf holes on land partly adjacent to the Mauna Lani Beach Resort area and mauka of the kiawe forest.

On the mauka end of the Puakō Kiawe Forest, Pauoa Bay Properties LLC is planning to develop a golf course.

Puakō Bay Investors LLC is planning to develop an 8-lot single family residential development along Puakō Beach Drive near the Puakō small boat ramp. Also, the University of Hawai'i is considering building a marine research center on land on the northern side of the small boat ramp.

2.4 Critical Problems and Issues

Several major community issues were discussed during the November 7, 2007 Puakō focus group. As a small community its needs are often not addressed as quickly as a community with a larger amount of resources. The critical issues of Puakō comprise four main categories: emergency preparedness, roads and accesses, water quality, and growth management.

Puakō is vulnerable to countless natural disasters from tsunamis and earthquakes to flooding and fire. This community is particularly vulnerable to fires as the dry climate and kiawe forest provide excellent fuel. The village itself is protected by a fire break but this must be maintained regularly, and overtime is often neglected due to lack of resources. One resource that Hawai'i County has been actively providing is Community Emergency Response Team (CERT) training. This program teaches community members basic disaster response skills to address immediate needs during an emergency situation. The CERT program is only as successful as the community makes it and how effective its communication is. For the Puakō community being prepared for any disasters that may come about is essential. Preparedness can be achieved through education, training, a comprehensive action plan that addresses potential dangers, escape routes, and a communication network.

The intersection of Queen Ka'ahumanu Hwy and Puako Beach Drive is sometimes difficult to navigate and could be greatly improved with the addition of a traffic signal or left turn buffer lane. Also residents have voiced concern over cars that are speeding on Puakō Beach Drive.

There are several shoreline access trails within Puakō that were established for public use. However, overtime many of them have been overrun with overgrown vegetation. Also homeowners adjacent to the access trails have been using them for driveways and other private uses. This is not only a nuisance to those trying to use the accesses but has also become a safety issue as emergency vehicles are unable to use them as alternative roadways.

Near shore reefs have experienced damage from illegal moorings and also from pollutants. The sources of most pollutants that enter the coastal waters are from cesspools, or sediment run-off from rain events. Part of the protection of the coastal water and reef system should occur through preservation of groundwater. There is also community concern over injection wells that are located on within the Mauna Lani Resort as some people believe such wells can cause pollution of groundwater and near offshore waters.

Lastly, the planned developments around the Puakō community are relatively large. Mauka of the Queen Ka'ahumanu Highway, Bridge 'Āina Lea, a potential 4,100 residential unit, 40 resort residential units, and five golf course development is planned. Also, the Stanford Carr Group is planning to develop a 691 residential unit and 284 hotel unit within the Mauna Lani Resort. Furthermore, there are hundreds of acres of land designated as urban expansion by the County within the South Kohala District, with most of these lands located in the southern portion of the district. If these developments do occur, there is a huge concern over how much, what type, and who will pay for the necessary infrastructure upgrades.