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State's Waimanalo leases creating a flap

By Jerry Burris
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An Ariyoshi administration push to end the practice of leasing state land on a short-term basis has stirred a political flap in Waimanalo, where dozens of farmers have been told their month-to-month agricultural leases may be auctioned off.

According to state Rep. Cam Cavasso, who represents Waimanalo, the Waimanalo Neighborhood Board this week passed a resolution urging a legislative hearing on his bills that would give the people now on the land the chance at the new long-term leases.

The issue poses a delicate problem for state administrators, who are under pressure to end the longstanding practice of letting people occupy state lands on month-to-month per-

mits.

Land Board Chairman Susumu Ono said that by law his department is supposed to cease the practice of the short-term permits. A 1979 legislative audit, he said, was highly critical of the practice, saying it left the door open for favoritism and potential abuse.

As many as 80 Waimanalo farmers on short-term leases have been notified that their lots will soon be put out for auction on long-term (25 years or more) leases.

Similar situations exist throughout the state, Ono said.

The problem, Cavasso said, is that the policy change threatens longtime Waimanalo families, some of whom have been on their farm lots for more than a generation. "It's a matter of family integrity," he said.

Over the years, Cavasso said,

a "personal relationship has developed between personalities on the land and personalities in the DLNR (Department of Land and Natural Resources)."

"That dependence has caused a terrible fear in the community," he said. "A fear of reprisal."

If the land now on short-term leases is put out for public auction, Cavasso said, some of the established Waimanalo families may lose "their" land and the improvements they have put in over the decades.

A similar situation faces long-term Waimanalo lessees, whose 25-year agriculture leases have expired and are scheduled to go out for bid, he said. There are about eight families in that category today and more coming up within the next year or two.

Cavasso has introduced bills

which would allow the conversion of the leased lands into fee for the current tenants or, alternatively, a "right of first refusal" process whereby the current tenants would have a right to match the highest sealed bid for the property.

"I'm trying to avoid a public bidding system where a person who has lived on the land has to bid against someone else for his land," he said.

Ono said he sympathizes with the plight of the longtime occupants on month-to-month leases, but said he is under a mandate to shift to more stable long-term leases. The law requires such leases to be auctioned off, he said.

"This is where the rub comes in," he admitted. "They've been there a long time, one generation grew up already.

"But there's really not much you can do unless you change state policy — in effect change the law to give the permittees the first crack."

But that, Ono said, "causes other problems." Other farmers and the general public would complain, he said, if the state favored one group over another in making long-term leases.

This is especially so since the month-to-month tenants got on the land without bidding in the first place, he said.

The Ariyoshi administration is opposed, however, to any bill that would mandate outright sale of state leased lands, he said.