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Ota Camp may be setting a precedent

By JOHN KNOX
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In a tiny four-acre Waipahu community called Ota Camp, Filipino residents are threatening to defy a landlord who wants to evict them and build higher-income housing on the land.

Are the problems of the residents or of the developer theirs alone? Or are there issues and trends here which could affect all the people of Hawaii?

The Advertiser recently asked these questions of some of the key figures in the Ota Camp controversy:

● Rex Blackburn—president of Amity Waipahu, Inc., the firm which leases and intends to develop the land—said, "There is no issue as to the Ota Camp residents which affects the people of the State of Hawaii."

"You have a mixture of people who are content in living in makeshift dwellings which could not be constructed under the present building codes and health requirements."

"THERE IS AT present insufficient rentals (from the tenants) to amortize the present lease rent, real property tax and other costs and expenses—and in spite of that, we find residents who do not keep their very low rents paid up to date."

"The Ota Camp residents have known for many years that the place was going to be improved. They have not sought to help themselves, as so many others have done, by their own efforts and hard work."

"They have taken the approach that both the public and private sectors, as well as Amity Waipahu, Inc., should take care of providing them with nominal rent for housing."

● Peter Tagalog—head of the Ota Camp Tenants Association—said his group may be an inspiration to other low-income or minority groups who are being displaced from their homes in the name of progress.

"These people, like in Chinatown or Ka-

haluu, they have this attitude like you cannot fight the rich man—no way you can fight the government," he said.

"I FEEL OTA CAMP is important because it shows there IS a way you can penetrate the government; there IS a way you can fight the rich developer."

"I want this so much to become an epidemic, for the Filipinos all over the Island. I feel the Filipinos are still the most disadvantaged group on the Island."

"But if we are successful, then maybe the Hawaiians can do it the same way. Maybe they can get back their life-styles and their lands. And then maybe it will relate to all the other disadvantaged groups all over the Island."

● George Akahane—Waipahu-area councilman, who spent several months last winter seeking a solution—said, "I think the Ota Camp issue might be summed up in one statement—public vs. private rights."

The "private" rights are those of the landlord-developer, said Akahane, while the "public" rights are the displacees' rights to have government consider their problems.

"PRESENT LAW requires all people dislocated by government to be found new homes by government," he said. "This does not apply to dislocations caused by private development, but nevertheless these people are still put on the market and they expect government to assist them."

"I have discussed with City attorneys the possibility of a new law requiring the benefactor of any General Plan or zoning change to relocate people who would be dislocated."

"But the corporation counsel has advised me the Council cannot do it by ordinance; we need enabling legislation from the State. I plan to write to the Legislature exploring this further."

● Herbert Takahashi—attorney for the Ota Camp tenants—said he views the situa-

tion as a battle to protect local life-styles from high-density urbanization.

He said this urbanization is caused by developers' seeking a profit from Mainland in-migrants, the only group which can afford to buy the high-cost housing.

Takahashi said this combination of Mainland in-migration and profit-oriented developers "will force local people to decide whether they're going to fight."

"OTA CAMP STANDS for a group of people not afraid to say they are going to fight for the right to control their own destiny," Takahashi said.

"This is not a new situation to those who are acquainted with labor struggles in Hawaii. This is a grass-roots effort by people confronted with someone who wants to alienate them from the land—just as some employers alienate workers from the fruits of their work."

"Nor should Ota Camp mean something unfamiliar to other ethnic groups, who are also being evicted from their land for the purpose of high-cost housing primarily built for Mainlanders."

● Bill Cook—formerly special housing assistant to the Governor and another figure who has worked for an Ota Camp solution—said he sees two issues.

One is the matter of fixing responsibility for relocating persons displaced by private development. He agrees with Akahane that some new law may be needed.

The other issue involves this question: To what extent should old life-styles be protected because they are familiar, and to what extent must they change with the times?

"RATHER THAN TRY to protect a life-style that suggests decrepit housing and low income, I would prefer any large State program to help these people become involved in a better way of life," he said.

"I admit that definition of 'better' is my own, but lack of health facilities and bad

housing does not seem to me a good life-style. I do not favor a life-style that makes any child ashamed to give his address."

● Leon Dagdagan is a steering committee member of Kabataan Katipunan ("Youth Together"), a Filipino youth group supporting Ota Camp residents. He has worked with the City's architect, gathering information about the nature of the Ota Camp life-style.

Said Dagdagan, "Ota Camp is a clear example of the class struggle, where the lower-class people are always given the bad end of the deal."

"BASICALLY, I BELIEVE the main problem in Hawaii for lower- or lower-middle class people is the land problem. They're always the ones that are being shifted from one place to another."

"To prevent that, people must get together to resist, unless alternatives like available land for the people can be found. Public housing by itself is no solution — there must be land."

● Yoshio Yanagawa—executive director of the Hawaii Housing Authority—said: "Right now Ota Camp is a symbol of 'progress.'"

"As land becomes more valuable in a community, landowners are going to look for the possibility of developing for a higher and better use. Ota Camp is not an isolated case."

"The solution to this kind of situation is a real dilemma. I don't know what the answer is at this time."

● Leo Pritchard—head of Mayor Frank F. Fasi's special housing task force, which has proposed a possible relocation project—said he did not want to comment on the issues involved in the Ota Camp dispute itself.

"I think the door it opens is very significant," he said. "If we come through with a successful project here, we'll know that there are innovative ways to do things in the low-income housing field."