

Hawai‘i Needs to Stand Governing on Its Head

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I have lived in Hawai‘i for close to fifty years, most of that time teaching political science at UH. The longer I live here, the worse I feel about the way this state governs. Hawai‘i’s government is a place where hopes and dreams go to die.

It drives me up the wall, makes me crazy.

Can I offer you more than just complaints? I’ll try, but it’s going to require you to think about politics in a very different way, just as I had to when I began to think about this a few years ago. You won’t find much of this in civics books, but you will find it going on all over the country.

Stick around, because if there ever was a time we need to govern differently, it is right now. Here goes.

Can Hawai‘i govern itself better, to get the state through the overwhelming fallout from the coronavirus pandemic?

Absolutely, but we need to change how we think about governing.

We need to build on the powerful but unappreciated importance of the neighborhood. That needs to be the foundation.

Much of the discussion about Hawai‘i’s COVID-19 recovery is about thinking big, as in “transformation.” I am advocating thinking small, or more precisely, thinking small as the first and essential step for thinking big.

Hawai‘i’s stubborn problems like unaffordable housing and low wages are more pressing and harder to solve than ever.

But there is no reason to believe that government will be any better at coping with these problems than they have been before.

People here generally have very little confidence in Hawai‘i government’s ability to deal with major problems. Polls show that a large majority are cynical about government, and believe that it does not act in their interests.

With good reason. Rail, Honolulu’s airport construction, and the Thirty Meter Telescope are the poster children of governmental ineptitude. They have traumatized us about politics.

Face it, for years the stories you hear and tell about governing in this place are about delays, screwups, and can’t-do—for instance, affordable housing, the homeless, and unemployment benefits, not to mention the permanently induced coma

called the state's IT infrastructure, which has made the unemployment benefits workers' tasks close to impossible.

And yet we talk about the need for transforming Hawai'i while maintaining the same approach to governing.

So here is the question: How can we rely on this same stagnant, mistake-laden governing process to recover from the COVID-19 pandemic?

Well, we can't.

Should we really be that pessimistic? No.

There is a better, achievable way to govern. That approach is called localism, with an emphasis on the fundamental power of neighborhoods.

These alternative ways of governing rely on and reinforce important Hawaiian values. They stress uniqueness and specifics rather than broad policies, or as David Brooks puts it, finding a place for a couple of homeless people in your neighborhood, rather than formulating a "homeless policy."

Is this alternative approach about "transformation"? No, it's more about rolling up your sleeves and doing stuff. There's a big difference.

All the talk about transforming Hawai'i in the pandemic's aftermath is a good thing. We need to think about basic changes.

But "transformation" focuses so much on where we want to be—our hopes and dreams—and too little on the unappreciated, nuts-and-bolts hard work we need to make these dreams come true.

Maybe the state will ultimately come up with a policy that will diversify Hawaii's one-industry economy. Meanwhile, what do we do for our suffering, economically fragile neighbors trying to survive the right-now?

Localism and Small-Scale Power

Localism is a form of governing that has become hugely popular across the US over the last couple of decades.

It has emerged from the idea that government, especially the federal government but to an extent state and local as well, has become typically unhelpful. Governments can't or won't fund essential projects. Government rules often make it difficult to get things done.

Localism is not anti-government. It is realistic about government. Its practitioners are bipartisan. The basic idea is that change needs to develop from the ground up, at "the tip of the shovel," as Brooks describes it.

It's hard to generalize about how localism works, because one of its basic tenets is that each place develops a model firmly based on its own distinctive culture.

Whatever these distinctions, localism emphasizes that much of the driving force for recovery comes not from government, but rather from below.

The successful examples have a very strong sense of place. Obviously, this is important for Hawai'i.

The process is collaborative, not official or bureaucratic. It brings together the widest range of people, from wealthy foundations to regular folks. The people who carry this load are not government officials.

To make this work, a community needs two kinds of entrepreneurs—economic and social—as well as people who are good at bringing this diverse group together. Or as one person describes them, “local patriots,” who know how things work and appreciate the significance of connecting.

Some projects that emerge are really big, like finding alternative industries to replace lost factories, or redeveloping a downtown. But many are small scale, neighborhood oriented. And even the big projects start small, testing out to see what happens.

I don’t have the space to describe the fascinating and surprisingly successful ways localism works, but the most interesting and fun-to-read account is by James and Deborah Fallows, *Our Towns*. It’s like an adventure story.

Why Is Neighborhood So Important and So Underappreciated?

Strong neighborhoods make localism work.

Let’s go back to talking about Hawai‘i for a moment. We consider Hawai‘i to be a friendly, welcoming place, a friends-and-neighbors sort of place, folks helping one another out in vital but under-the-political radar kinds of ways.

You can see it in how people responded to the pandemic. They quickly organized amazing food supply chains. Neighbors checked in with one another. Zoom became a standard tool of the tech uninitiated. Doctors in private practice developed COVID-19 testing sites on their own.

Before the pandemic, TMT protestors on the mountain were spectacularly successful, first in spontaneously building a community, and then sustaining it with a full menu of services.

All of this is ‘ohana in the broad meaning of the word. And that alone makes small-scale, informal sites important as an asset for recovery.

Neighborhoods also do much more. They are the heartbeat in ways we are only beginning to understand.

Over the past few years, the economist Raj Chetty’s pathbreaking research has shown just how important neighborhoods are (Cook). Here is his fundamental finding that is changing how some cities are thinking: *The neighborhood a person grew up in is by far the most important predictor of your future economic success. The standard indicators like your family or the labor market do not explain this.*

Neighborhoods, according to Chetty, mean something much smaller and less easily identifiable than say ‘Ewa or Kaimuki. Chetty shows that economic success varies from block to block. Two mini-neighborhoods a block or so from one another that look very similar, and have very similar social and economic characteristics, can differ dramatically. There appears to be something very subtle going on, having to do with the kinds of neighbors you have and the social networks around you.

Neighborhoods are valuable in another way. During a crisis, they can be the difference between surviving and dying. People living in neighborhoods with strong social infrastructures—think of available places for people to gather and know one another—are much more likely to survive a disaster, because others keep track of them.

In 1995, hundreds of people died in a terrible Chicago heatwave. Typically, they died alone and isolated. Controlling for everything else, such as neighborhood racial composition and economic characteristics, people in strong social infrastructure neighborhoods were much less likely to die than people living where social infrastructure was weak.

Neighborliness is a resource and a skill set. Social capital, social infrastructure, the people you know two units down in your townhouse complex—these are resources that need to be more self-consciously developed, and much more forcefully used.

It is so interesting and so sad how much we like to think of Hawai'i as a neighborly place, and how much Hawai'i's powerful sense of place is reflected in our music and the stories we tell.

Yet at the same time we think about politics in such stilted, unrewarding, conventional, and unproductive ways.

It's time people try something else. This alternative has a proven track record, and it allows us to build on the underappreciated strengths people here already have, and at the same time worry about losing.

Works Cited

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