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By Kiersten Faulkner

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Star-Bulletin News Building. Queen Street Entrance. Progress; Section IV; Page 3. Star-Bulletin photo by Warren R. Roll.

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Over the past few months, the Hawaii Community Development Authority (HCDA) has given development approval for at least nine new high-rises in the Kakaako district, and more are undoubtedly on the way.

The face of the district is changing rapidly, growing denser with housing units mixing with retail, industrial, office and services.

Despite established zoning regulations, most of the developments seek to maximize height, minimize setbacks, and squeeze as much parking and as little landscaping as can be approved.

Notable exceptions are Kamehameha Schools' SALT project, Howard Hughes Corp.'s remodel of the IBM Building, and HCDA's own commitment to utilize the Royal Brewery.

Otherwise, small-scale buildings and open spaces are being sacrificed to this sky city of the future.

Livable cities around the world found that preserving human scale and historic value provide for a rich urban environment. The vibrant mix resulting from retaining historic districts and structures while adding contemporary, well-designed buildings is evident in Chicago, Boston and San Francisco.

The downside of poorly planned development was demonstrated by the "urban renewal" movement of the 1960s, when turn-of-the-century buildings were demolished and replaced by towering skyscrapers and sterile parking lots.

This discredited approach to urban planning is once again evident in the piecemeal approvals happening throughout Kakaako. As the state agency responsible for the district, HCDA has the opportunity to put a stop to this short-sighted way of doing business.

We envision a vibrant and renewed Kakaako in which historic buildings are preserved, rehabilitated and

used for a variety of community services.

We envision a future in which there is a livable mix of buildings of different scales in a walkable community, and where residents of all income levels have access to well-built structures and lively gathering spaces punctuating the neighborhood.

We would like to see a community that is still recognizable as Kakaako.

This vision supports a district that is economically robust, environmentally sustainable, and affordable to working families.

It sees historic properties as an amenity for those families and to all who live, work, play, worship, learn and shop in the area.

To achieve this vision, HCDA must take action:

» To reject over-reaching development proposals that would destroy or diminish historically-significant properties.



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» Require urban design principles for appropriate streetscapes, scale and setbacks.

» Ensure that every new development provides the best possible design solution for each and every parcel.

The possibilities for Kakaako will be tested as HCDA reviews the proposal for redeveloping the historic News Building. The 1929-era News Building is an outstanding example of the Beaux-Art Revival style, the work of master architects Emory & Webb.

A pending proposal would demolish a sizable part of the historic structure for a 10-story parking structure, to join the 11-story garage being built at the back of the lot, and two 400-foot tall towers.

The proposed lowest-common denominator design for the News Building underscores all the fears of an urban jungle in which proven best practices are abandoned.

There are alternatives that can preserve the building and maintain a human scale for the neighborhood and still allow for sensible development and affordability for working families.

Cities around the world have integrated smart housing solutions with good urban design, including preserving the past while providing for affordable and mixed-income housing. Honolulu should do the same.