



Q+A

Micah Kāne

Four years into his tenure as the director of the Department of Hawaiian Home Lands (DHHL), Micah Kāne has helped to turn around a historically troubled agency. Among other innovations, he's overseen a shift from individual house construction to larger-scale, master-planned regional developments such as East Kapolei, where DHHL recently broke ground on Phase I. With 403 units, it's the department's largest residential development to date.

Q: How has DHHL been able to refocus its efforts?

A: The advisory board we assembled has been a key component of our success. My first week here, I remember sitting right at this desk, thinking, *What am I going to do? I don't know how to develop.* But we have 200,000 acres of land, we have quite a bit of money through the trust, we have offices on every island, the ability to designate zoning and expedite permitting, 140 staff members. If you gave any developers those resources, they'd be in good shape. So we chose 10 of the best developers and businessmen in the state, and convinced them that we wanted them to be part of this process. With the East Kapolei II project, for example, we broke them into groups and said, we have 318 acres of land, we have to house 1,600 people, these are the requirements for schools, parks, public facilities, and you've got \$10 million. Make it work. Brainstorming challenges like that bring out the most creative, interesting ideas.

Q: So more homes are being built. What is Hawaiian Homelands doing to make sure that Hawaiians can afford them when the time comes?

A: We've invested about \$1.5 million in what we call our HOAP program [Home Ownership Assistance Program]. It takes families on our wait list who need help, and gets them engaged in financial literacy and evaluation. In the past 18 to 24 months, we've done 76 homebuyer education classes across the state, with 1,600 beneficiaries attending. We've had 1,400 families in one-on-one case-management efforts. Already, out of the 1,600 beneficiaries, 92 of them are in homes. Those are families who were on some type of government assistance, and now they're contributing taxes back into our community.

CONTINUED ON PAGE 38

Q+A

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CONTINUED FROM PAGE 36

Q: Your current strategic plan calls for every qualified Hawaiian currently on the list to be given an opportunity to be placed on land by 2008. How is that going?

A: The list is this real abstract issue. There are about 20,000 names on the list. We estimate that one out of every two has a home right now. There isn't any urgency for them to get a home from us. Another 25 percent we're statutorily required to keep on our list, but we don't have any communication with them. So we want to build about 6,000 units over a five-year period. We're in the third year of our strategic plan, and we're projected to do about 1,500 this next year. We're kind of on track, probably 300 units behind. But the model is there, the projects are there, the momentum is there. Now it's just an issue of money.

Q: Is the Department of Hawaiian Homelands still facing legal challenges from those who feel that it discriminates unconstitutionally on the basis of race?

A: Right now, we spend about 25 percent of our time defending our right to exist as a Hawaiian organization in Hawai'i. We're spending hundreds of thousands of dollars on legal battles. We have to put up a defense, but, just as importantly, we have to tell people what we do, tell them the impact we're having, not only on Native Hawaiians, but on the state as a whole. We're housing people who had been in that low-income, affordable rental market, which is freeing up thousands of units for the non-Hawaiian community.

Q: What do you see as the ultimate goal of the Department of Hawaiian Homelands?

A: We envision a department that is so successful that we will work our way out of a job. There will not be a need for the Department of Hawaiian Homelands. Our native people, as defined under the Hawaiian Homes Commission Act, will have been rehabilitated. I get kind of emotional about it.

MICHAEL KEANY