

# Business, Government, Tourism, and the Environment: Maui in the 1980s and 1990s

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From the mid-1980s into the late 1990s residents of Maui, Hawaii, considered major additions to their island's main airport near the city of Kahului, including lengthening its primary runway from 7,000 to 9,600 feet and building an entirely new runway 8,500 feet long. Longer runways would accommodate larger airplanes, thus allowing direct, nonstop service between Maui and many parts of the globe for the first time. Passengers and freight going to or leaving from Kahului would no longer need to be transferred from large or small airplanes in Honolulu. The proposal to expand the Kahului airport quickly became a highly charged issue, sorely dividing Mauians. Environmental groups, labor unions, and business associations held varying views on the matter, as did a number of outspoken individuals; there also existed divisions within the groups.

The controversy that developed over the Kahului airport is well worth studying, for its history provides a window through which scholars may look at a number of important issues. First of all, the topic allows a glimpse at how people living on a far western American frontier viewed their environment and how they sought to shape it, subjects of longstanding interest to historians of the American West and the American environment. Secondly, and even more broadly, an examination of the airport issue illuminates questions about economic development, topics concerning relationships between center and peripheral regions in the world as discussed by some world systems scholars. Finally, exploration of the airport issue offers a valuable way for scholars to investigate public policies for economic growth, and highlights, like many recent studies, the importance of governmental decision making.

My paper begins by sketching the development of the airport issue. Next, it looks at the most intense period of controversy, the mid-1990s. And, finally, it closes by discussing the significance of the airport controversy.

Discussion about the expansion of the Kahului airport dates back to the rapid expansion of tourism on Maui in the 1980s. As Maui developed into a premier tourist destination in that decade, the airport seemed inadequate to many Mauians. Then, as Maui's economy slumped in the 1990s due to a fall-off in tourism, a decline linked to recessions in California and Japan, airport additions designed to bolster tourism assumed a new urgency in the minds of some.

In 1993 these concerns led the Hawaiian state government to prepare a new master plan for the Kahului airport. The plan examined Maui in 1990 and tried to predict changes over the next twenty years. In 1990 Maui possessed a resident population of 91,000, with an additional daily average of 35,000 visitors. Authorities predicted if the proposed airport extensions were made Maui could have 145,000 residents and 71,000 tourists per day by 2010. The Kahului airport handled nearly 5 million passengers in 1990, but with additions could be expected to handle 9.5 million passengers by 2010, including 2.4 million coming or going nonstop from the mainland of the United States and another 432,000 arriving and departing nonstop from international (mainly Asian) locations [State of Hawaii, 1993]. With the publication of this plan, debate intensified and battle lines formed, separating Mauians for and against the proposed airport changes.

Supporters formed the Maui Pueo Coalition. Led by Jimmy Rust, a labor leader who lent the group the name of his family's aumakua (personal god or totem), the pueo or Hawaiian owl, this coalition led the charge for runway extension. An umbrella organization, the Pueo Coalition was composed of twenty major organizations including business groups (the Maui Chamber of Commerce, the Maui Visitors Bureau, the Maui Economic Development Board, and the Maui Hotel Association), labor unions (the ILWU Local 142, the Laborers International Local 368, and the Hawaii Carpenter's Union Local 745) and a few farm organizations (the Maui Farm Bureau, for example). The economic message of the Pueo Coalition was blunt. "Without one-stop flights to Maui from major world airports," Rust claimed, "we will see decreased tourism which will lead to fewer jobs and a reduced tax revenue base." Thousands of jobs were, Rust averred, at risk. Unless airport extensions took place soon, "the next generation [of Mauians] will leave for other states" [U.S. Department of Transportation, Federal Aviation Administration, and State of Hawaii, Department of Transportation, Airports Division, 1996, vol. II, unpagel].

Representatives of numerous business bodies rallied to Rust's support. The head of the Maui Visitors Bureau, who was also the vice-chairman of the Pueo Coalition, observed that Maui was in increasing competition with other destinations worldwide for tourists and business and that airport alterations "will help us counter the onslaught, enabling us to reach out to new markets domestically and internationally." The executive director of the Maui Hotel Association, which claimed two hundred member hotels, echoed such sentiments, saying that "we have to do what we can to keep it [tourism] healthy." The president of the Maui County Farm Bureau endorsed runway extension, writing that a longer runway was needed "because exports represent such a significant part of the total market for our agricultural production" [U.S. Department of Transportation, Federal Aviation Administration, and State of Hawaii, Department of Transportation, Airports Division, 1996, vol. II, unpagel].

Members of the Pueo Coalition downplayed environmental dangers. One concern was that unwanted pests – snakes, insects, and plants – might hitch rides on planes from South Pacific islands and Asia, flourish on Maui, and threaten the island's native flora and fauna. Planes stopping in Honolulu landed

at an airport built on a reef out in the city's harbor. This physical isolation made it difficult for pests escape into the countryside. Rust stated that his group was concerned about this danger, but he put forward no real plan to deal with it. The president of the Maui Farm Bureau said that "individual farmers should be responsible for pest management on their own farms." A second environmental and cultural concern was possible harm airport extensions might do to Kanaha Pond, located not far from the runways. This pond was home to three endangered species of birds. More, however, was involved in the Kanaha Pond than birdlife. Built in the mid-1700s by a leading Maui chief, the pond had been a fishpond for the growing of mullet and was valued by Native Hawaiians as part of their culture. Claiming that there was no evidence that planes passing overhead had hurt birdlife at Kanaha Pond, Rust doubted that airport additions would have any negative impacts [U.S. Department of Transportation, Federal Aviation Administration, and State of Hawaii, Department of Transportation, Airports Division, 1996, vol. II, unpagel].

Opponents of airport expansion attacked on several fronts. Led by Dana and Isaac Hall, many formed the Maui No Ka Oi Coalition ("Maui is the Best" – the island's motto – Coalition). The Halls were (and are) Hawaiian rights activists. They wanted to give more control over the islands to Native Hawaiians, control that they feared might be threatened by a new influx of outsiders encouraged by airport extensions. The group went farther to claim that any airport expansions would bring too many new visitors to Maui, thus straining the island's already over-stressed infrastructure of roads, sewers, water sources, and supplies of electricity. In short, the Halls and others argued that Hawaii should be kept in its native state, to the degree that that was still possible. Environmental issues were in the forefronts of the minds of members of many organizations that joined the Maui No Kai Oi Coalition. The presidents of the Hawaiian Audubon Society and the Hawaiian Sierra Club joined with the superintendent of the Haleakala National Park on Maui to protest that, contrary to what Rust argued, airport extensions would hurt the Kanaha Pond and to urge that the danger of alien pests be taken seriously [Anderson interview, 1997; U.S. Department of Transportation, Federal Aviation Administration, and State of Hawaii, Department of Transportation, Airports Division, 1996, vol. II, unpagel].

Opponents also raised economic issues. Some were self-serving. The owner of the Tropical Orchid Farm in Haiku, the largest exporter of live orchids from Maui, greatly feared "the very real threats to Maui's eco-system and agriculture which could arise from direct overseas flights." Observing correctly that "small diversified agriculture," not tourism, was the "fastest growing segment" of Maui's economy, he wanted severe limitations placed on any airport alterations. So did the owner of a papaya farm. Thus, far from all of Maui's farmers agreed with the Maui Farm Bureau that airport extensions would help agriculturists. For specialized growers of fruits, vegetables, and flowers the prospect of unwanted insects was terrifying [U.S. Department of Transportation, Federal Aviation Administration, and State of Hawaii, Department of Transportation, Airports Division, 1996, vol. II, unpagel].

For others the economic stakes were broader. The group Maui Tomorrow, which claimed 1,000 members by the mid-1990s, led much of the fight against airport additions. Maui Tomorrow stressed the need to diversify Maui's economy and concluded that the airport improvements would not do so. To the contrary, the association's president argued that "if the runway extension is more of a stimulus to tourism than it is to agriculture, the result will be a less diversified economy." And, in fact, he thought that "the runway extension would disrupt agricultural and social pursuits." Moreover, he pointed out that economic and environmental issues were intertwined, for the importation of agricultural pests could "hamper efforts to diversify our economic base by making it harder (more costly) for diversified agriculture to succeed." Pulling out all the stops, the head of Maui Tomorrow went on to argue that tourism itself, far from being helped, would most likely be hurt by airport extensions. The influx of too many tourists would, he feared, overwhelm the island. "Maui must be careful," he warned, "not to let the success of tourism degrade the natural environment and quality of life upon which that tourism depends." Maui must beware, he continued, lest it "go down the path of Coney Island in New York or of Mallorca in the Mediterranean" [U.S. Department of Transportation, Federal Aviation Administration, and State of Hawaii, Department of Transportation, Airports Division, 1996, vol. II, unpagel].

As these statements suggest, for many opponents more was at stake than individual economic or environmental issues. Cherished ways of life seemed to hang in the balance. For no people was this truer than for Native Hawaiians. Composing about one-quarter of Maui's population, the largest single population block on the island, many Native Hawaiians and part-Native Hawaiians opposed changes to their island. One Native Hawaiian wrote, "the expansion of the Kahului airport will devastate the unique natural beauty of my island home, Maui," and concluded that "Maui's beauty and lifestyle is unparalleled and must be preserved." Another, a fisherman, objected to having public hearings at the airport. "Why couldn't we have the hearing down in the Maui Community Center, where it's common ground?" he asked. "Am I to be someone talking about spirituality, cultural resources, the environment where you choose it to be?" he wondered [Mayer interview, 1997; Pyle interview, 1997; U.S. Department of Transportation, Federal Aviation Administration, and State of Hawaii, Department of Transportation, Airports Division, 1996, vol. II, unpagel].

After listening to the various sides on the airport controversy and engaging in further studies on the matter, the State of Hawaii joined with the federal government in 1996 to issue a new plan favoring the airport extensions. After further hearings, and the adoption of some slight modifications (none of which satisfied opponents of airport extension), the airport plan went to the governor of Hawaii for final approval. That approval was expected by mid-1998, with implementation to follow quickly.

## Conclusions

It seems to me that the controversy over the expansion of Maui's airport resonates with earlier issues running through the history of the Hawaiian Islands. The economic growth of the Hawaiian Islands, along with that of most western states (at least before World War II), took place largely in terms of a series of monocultures. Single industries – mining, cattle-raising, wheat-growing – dominated large regions of the West, with little economic diversity resulting. Certainly this was the case in Hawaii. From the early nineteenth century into the mid-twentieth century, Hawaii's (and Maui's) development depended on such monocultures: a trade in sandalwood, the provision of supplies for whalers, and – most important – growing sugar cane and pineapples. One could go further and note that such patterns of development were unique to neither the West nor Hawaii. This type of development characterized much global economic activity from the sixteenth into the twentieth century, as European nations and businesses established hegemony over large parts of the world. As ties of global trade and colonization spread, peripheral areas saw their diversified, often near-subsistence, economies give way to commercial economies based on a handful of staple crops or mineral resources.

In very real senses, Maui's commitment to tourism – as seen in the Kahului airport controversy – perpetuated the island's earlier "plantation" economy. As 1998 began, Maui and the other Hawaiian islands remained captives of their past. Successful efforts at economic diversification, whether in agriculture, industry, or services, were few and far between.

Nonetheless, the airport controversy exposed varying visions different groups had for Maui's development. While some Mauians opted for an economy basically dependent on one industry, tourism, others favored, instead, efforts to build a more diversified economic base, even if doing so meant slower growth. For about a decade opponents of airport extensions successfully wielded new political tools, especially environmental impact statements and legal actions, to limit development. The controversy showed that more than economic issues separated Mauians. Economic issues merged, in fact, with cultural and ideological concerns. Differing views about Native Hawaiian sovereignty issues, and what the physical environment of their island should be, deeply divided Mauians. At root lay competing ideas about the quality of life on Maui and the roles different types of economic growth might play in creating those types of life.

## References

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