

West O'ahu Stadium bill would raze Aloha

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The declining condition of Aloha Stadium has prompted lawmakers to consider tearing down the 32-year-old facility and replacing it with a new \$300 million complex in West O'ahu.

The 100-acre Aloha Stadium site in 'Aiea could be sold to help pay for a new stadium.

Aloha Stadium, the venue for the NFL Pro Bowl on Saturday, is in need of repair, with rust damage, structural problems, a shortage of toilets and noncompliance with the Americans with Disabilities Act among its shortcomings.

"If we don't repair it within seven years, we may have to shut it down for safety reasons," said state comptroller Russ Saito.

Razing it might make more sense than spending the roughly \$215 million needed to extend its life by 20 or 30 years, said state Rep. K. Mark Takai, D-34th (Pearl City, Newtown, Waiiau).

"That's money we're throwing to something that's already falling apart," said Takai, who introduced a bill to consider replacing the 'Aiea stadium with a new complex in West O'ahu. "I'd rather spend that money on a new facility."

The bill, following initial deliberation at a House Tourism and Culture Committee hearing yesterday, advanced for further discussion.

Several high-ranking politicians either support or see potential in replacing the stadium, including state House Majority Leader Kirk Caldwell, Congressman Neil Abercrombie and Mayor Mufi Hannemann.

According to a 2005 study by Honolulu firm Wiss Janney Elstner Associates Inc., the stadium requires \$99 million in short-term improvements and an additional \$115 million in improvements to extend its useful life by 20 to 30 years.

Short-term needs include about \$29 million for structural repairs and corrosion protection, and \$26 million to repair seating areas. There's also a shortage of 302 toilets in women's bathrooms.

Administration officials included \$25 million in Gov. Linda Lingle's budget request last year to start stadium repairs, but funding was rejected by lawmakers.

This year the request is \$38 million over two years.

EXPLORING OPTIONS

The Legislature is taking up the issue, which has been studied and advocated before only to result in state leaders, up to now, largely deferring improvements and making Band-Aid fixes to the stadium.

"There are some options available that we should take a look at," Takai said. "We have an opportunity to take a look decades from now, and plan for the eventual demise of Aloha Stadium."

House Bill 282 proposes that Aloha Stadium's site be conveyed to and redeveloped by private interests in exchange for land or money that could be used by the state for a new stadium.

At the hearing yesterday, ideas were offered to retain the land under Aloha Stadium and partner with private interests to require that redevelopment of the site include affordable housing.

Under this scenario, only development rights for the 'Aiea site — no real estate — would be sold, and conceivably would raise part of or close to the estimated \$300 million needed for a new stadium.

Another suggestion was to locate a new stadium on land already owned by the state, such as part of a 900-acre parcel mauka of land planned for a University of Hawai'i-West O'ahu campus in East Kapolei, or perhaps at Kalaeloa.

"There is a need for this discussion to happen," said House Tourism & Culture Committee chairman Ryan Yamane, D-37th (Waipahu, Mililani).

Saito, the state comptroller, raised concerns about HB282 and opposed the measure.

One potential roadblock is a federal provision attached to the state's deed for the land under Aloha Stadium that requires the land be used only for public recreation, and prohibits transferring the land by sale, lease or any other means to a nongovernment entity.

The provision, governed by the Department of the Interior, stems from the land once being U.S. Navy property.

"This bill is not feasible and should be held," said Saito.

The state Department of Land and Natural Resources echoed Saito's concern over the federal provision, and noted in written testimony that the federal government could take back the Aloha Stadium property if the covenant is violated.

Lloyd Nekoba, an Abercrombie special assistant, noted that the land previously was used for public housing after it was conveyed from the Navy to the city, and said Abercrombie could help try to obtain Interior Department approval to modify its covenant.

"I think these things can be resolved," Nekoba testified.

LOCATION ISSUE

Another issue raised was the stadium's proximity to O'ahu's population, and whether moving it to West O'ahu might hurt attendance at events that generate annual revenue of about \$7 million, including \$4 million from the swap meet operating three times a week.

The 50,000-seat stadium, built for \$37 million in 1975, also is a regular venue for UH and high school football games, concerts, graduations and fairs.

Saito acknowledged that O'ahu's population core may be shifting toward West O'ahu, but that the stadium is about as centrally located as it can be with nearby connections to H-1, H-2 and H-3 freeways plus a planned transit stop.

Saito also objected to the bill for ignoring immediate needs of Aloha Stadium, which he said could be forced to close if major repair money is not authorized by lawmakers soon.

The Wiss Janney Elstner study examined the economics of replacing Aloha Stadium with a new \$250 million facility on the same site, and concluded that a new stadium wasn't financially favorable.

The study accounted for estimated additional revenue from a new stadium as well as the present value of future maintenance. Cost for a new stadium today is estimated to be \$300 million, and could be significantly higher if a new stadium is built on land lacking infrastructure.

But Takai and others said that selling development rights to the Aloha Stadium property should make replacement the best economic option.

BEEN THERE

A similar idea has been raised before by state leaders, including former Gov. Ben Cayetano, who told UH the most economical option may be to sell Aloha Stadium for scrap, sell the 'Aiea site to developers and use the money to build a new facility in West O'ahu.

Abercrombie in written testimony suggested that replacing Aloha Stadium now could help ease Hawai'i's affordable housing shortage by requiring that a private developer use at least some of the 'Aiea site for work force housing adjacent to a planned city transit stop.

Local faith-based organization Faith Action for Community Equity testified that redeveloping 100 acres in 'Aiea next to a planned rail station would create enormous opportunity to provide low-income housing as part of a mixed-use project.

Mayor Hannemann, according to spokesman Bill Brennan, supports the general idea to build a new stadium in West O'ahu connected to mass transit and using the existing stadium site for transit-oriented redevelopment.

"He definitely thinks that that's a good idea," Brennan said.

HB282 was referred with amendments to the Water, Land, Ocean Resources and Hawaiian Affairs Committee, which has yet to schedule a hearing.