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EDITORIAL | **OUR VIEW**

Editorial: Protect those on rental assistance

Feb. 27, 2022

Low-income residents are being squeezed out of housing on two fronts. One, of course, is the extremely competitive and undersupplied rental market, in which a prospective tenant vies with better-funded applicants, including some military personnel with supplemental means to pay a higher rent.

The other is resistance among some landlords to even consider a renter holding a claim to a “Section 8” or other government housing subsidy, assuming they’re even able to secure such a voucher. Just scan through the ads on Craigslist or other for-rent listings for the “No Section 8” conditions posted there.

Certainly there are reasons why any renter might be legitimately on the losing end of a contest for a lease, but they at least deserve a chance to make their pitch. Many can show a record of responsibility, especially after the pandemic pushed more families to their financial limits.

In a state still in the throes of a persistent housing shortage and the homelessness crisis that is its worst consequence, this abject rejection should not be tolerated. In fact, Gov. David Ige has held “landlord summits,” starting in 2015, to encourage the acceptance of more Section 8 vouchers. If a legislative solution could be realized this session, that would clearly help.

Leadership at the Legislature has focused its affordable-housing efforts on a big push to address an enormous backlog of housing benefits due to Native Hawaiians under the Hawaiian Home Lands. The House is proposing \$600 million for DHHL homes; even if the outlay approaches that amount, there are many in the non-Hawaiian population that also need help.

Additionally there is ongoing planning to include an affordable- housing component of the [Aloha Stadium redevelopment](#). House Bill 1748, which is still moving, would authorize bond funding for the Rental Housing Revolving Fund to support construction of new projects.

None of these efforts can deliver homes anytime soon, though, and there is so much more that needs to be done, just to keep pace with the drumbeat for more housing. A 2019 study by the state Department of Business, Economic Development and Tourism estimated an annual need for 5,200 new units just to meet the Oahu demand for low-income housing.

That’s why passage of one of the measures seeking to reinforce the use of federal housing subsidies is so critical to people searching for rentals right now.

Bills introduced this session include Senate Bills 2314 and 2399, but the one that already has crossed over to the House is SB 206, which [would prohibit discrimination](#), including in advertisements for available real property, based on participation in a housing assistance program.

The measure cites studies showing “that when there are laws to prevent discrimination against renters with housing vouchers, such renters are 12% more likely to find housing.”

According to the Hawaii Interagency Council on Homelessness, 15 states and more than 100 local jurisdictions have passed laws to limit rental assistance discrimination — and have seen an increase in voucher utilization rates. Hawaii needs to join these ranks. A 12% improvement in low-income renters finding a place would be a welcome improvement.

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In more direct initiatives to grow the affordable-housing inventory, there have been ambitious proposals before the Legislature that have not gained traction. Most notably, state Sen. Stanley Chang has pursued an aggressive affordable-housing program that was [dubbed ALOHA Homes](#), modeled after the large-scale high-rise approach pioneered in Singapore.

Chang envisioned a version of this for the Halawa area pegged for redevelopment in the New Aloha Stadium Entertainment District.

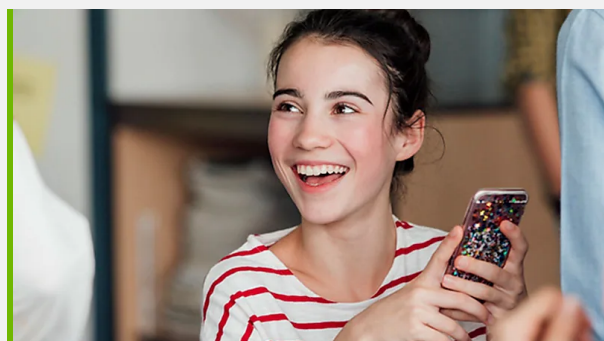
The initial critique focused on the density of housing for the area. However, housing advocates taking a deeper look at the idea have found it to be unviable for other reasons.

A study, updated last September, was prepared by Hawai'i Appleseed and Hawai'i Budget & Policy Center for the state's Hawaii Housing Finance and Development Corp. It examined elements of the ALOHA Homes proposal to determine feasibility.

The core issue was whether large tracts of state-owned land could be leased for 99-year terms, enhancing the affordability of leasehold rentals built there. But the study noted legal complications with tying up lands, much of which are restricted due to obligations to Native Hawaiian beneficiaries of former Hawaiian Kingdom lands.

"Although there may be some parcels of state lands which do not have restrictions on sale and could potentially enable some leasehold projects, a leasehold program at the scale contemplated in ALOHA Homes will not be feasible," the report concluded, rightly urging that smaller-scale development of leasehold lands be pursued.

But at a minimum, the state should do what it can to help low-income renters use resources already provided to them. Passing SB 206 would be a place to start fulfilling its mission.



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