

Mayor: County tax revenues falling

BY EVE CLUTE

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LAHAINA – It is said that oil and water don't mix, yet both topics rose to the surface at last week's county budget community meeting.

Mayor Charmaine Tavares explained that due to the high cost of oil that makes gasoline so expensive, people on Maui are driving less. Fewer drivers equates to the county receiving less money from fuel tax.

Fuel tax pays for road safety improvements like road resurfacing and adding speed bumps. The reduction in fuel tax revenues will create a reduction in services for road repairs in fiscal year 2010, which begins July 1, 2009, and ends June 30, 2010.

The mayor continued, "High oil prices increase the cost of everything we buy. Someone showed me their dry cleaning bill that included fuel tax. People from Japan are charged a \$200 to \$400 fuel surcharge on their airline ticket. With a reduction in tourism, there are fewer dollars from the transient accommodations tax (TAT). The TAT used to be \$20 million a year; that has been reduced by several million dollars. Fewer houses are being bought, which reduces the real property tax."

All of these taxes and fees are used to fund county projects.

Despite the smaller county budget for 2009-10, Christopher Brosius, watershed coordinator of the West Maui Mountains Watershed Partnership, shared why this program needs continued county funding.

"Currently, 77 percent of the county's water supply comes from West Maui forests. West Maui water is dispersed to all of Central Maui, north to Paia and south to Makena," he said.

Their website at www.westmauiwatershed.org points out that over 18,000 acres of land is protected behind 16 miles of fence, built to keep out pigs, goats, deer and dirt bikes. Over 126 rare and endangered species are protected.

Protecting and sustaining the diversity of the native forest "is essential in recharging water resources for Maui," Brosius testified at the hearing on Tuesday night at Lahaina Civic Center.

County funds are needed because state and federal funding have all but dried up, Brosius added.

The county also received thanks for programs supported in the past.

Eight children from the West Maui Boys and Girls Club shared that the club "taught them what they did not learn in school, like dancing, chess and cooking."

The children ages 9-17 were especially grateful for help with their homework and were proud

when their math grades went from “D” to “A.”

Colin Hanlon, chief professional officer of the seven Maui clubs, thanked the mayor and her staff for “investing in youth.”

The expanded West Maui Boys and Girls Club opening in January 2009 will feature a new Teen Center, larger snack shop, Learning Room with computers, larger game room and new bathrooms.

The new Lahaina Villager bus received much praise, along with several requests to add a reverse loop. If added, the schedule would then change from one hour to half-hour intervals at each stop.

County Transportation Director Don Medeiros stated that the purpose of the bus system is to get cars off the road. The employees and shoppers of West Maui are using the bus at a rate of 20 to 30 people per 25-passenger bus. If this ridership continues, his department will request money for a second Villager bus in the mayor’s budget.

Final decisions on budget allocations will be made by May 30, 2009, when the county’s proposed spending plan goes before the County Council. If approved, a second bus could be added by July 1, 2009.

Medeiros added that a study for bus shelters was done in 2007 for all of Maui. Each shelter needs a blueprint to follow federal, state and county laws, and must consider curbs, gutters, sidewalks, lighting, private property, county Special Management Area zones, utility poles, easements and Americans with Disabilities Act provisions.

“This will be an ongoing project that will go on for the next six years and longer as the system expands,” Medeiros said.

A concrete pad will be added this year to the Papalua Street bus stop near the Bank of Hawaii parking lot to comply with disability laws.

May Fujiwara of the Honolua-Lahaina Senior Citizens Club spoke on behalf of the 30 senior citizens who attended the meeting.

She was thankful for the programs at the West Maui Senior Center and asked for continued Maui Economic Opportunity transportation for house-to-house pick-up for handicapped and frail seniors.

She praised the bus service and asked for shelters that would increase the visibility of the bus stops and add protection from the rain and hot sun.