

It's time for emphasis on the economy, proactive solutions

THE CHAMBER VIEW

by Pamela Tumpap



Gas prices keep rising. Financial markets have tightened. We're losing visitors from the loss of

cruise ships and from the closing of Aloha Airlines and ATA. Molokai Ranch has closed. Transient-vacation rentals are being shuttered, with continued negative messaging going out about Maui. And now, in another stunning development, GMAC shut down the Aloha Airlines cargo division this past Monday — resumption of Aloha cargo service Thursday night under a court-appointed trustee notwithstanding.

Businesses, particularly small businesses, are being hit from every angle, and it's time for leaders to come together to focus on the economy and develop progressive, forward-thinking solutions to protect our economic well-being.

Aloha Airlines cargo carried 85 percent of the state's interisland air cargo, including all mail to and from Maui, as well as produce and fresh flowers. This business served many public needs but, at the end of the day, was still a private business, and the operation was closed for financial reasons when an anticipated sale didn't

go through. Unfortunately, public interests weren't protected in the bankruptcy process and fell between the cracks.

The closing hugely impacted businesses and residents. Concern grew rapidly. Grocers and the public worried about produce. Businesses began looking at how to change their shipping models and to plan further out. Local farmers scrambled to find ways to get perishable products to market at reasonable costs, with everyone seeing the potential for costs to rise exponentially.

Some hoped that Hawaiian Airlines would expand its services rapidly — as it had done with passenger flights — to help with the cargo situation, but they recognized that Hawaiian had neither the staffing nor the night freighters to handle the additional volume.

The Hawaii Superferry, cited by the Maui Chamber of Commerce as an important addition to our transportation infrastructure, presented some answers for cargo between Maui and Oahu. However, the Superferry does not go to all of the islands. Also, the Superferry does not accept vehicles without drivers; therefore, the time and expense of a staffed vehicle must be factored into the equation.

At the chamber, we quickly began exploring cooperative shipping methods with shared trucks and containers to go on

the Superferry to and from Oahu to keep costs down for individual businesses. As we were working on alternative solutions, other fixes emerged. Freight-forwarding companies stepped up to bridge the gap, and work with the Hawaii Superferry and other airline carriers.

We received word, prior to the announcement of Aloha's cargo closing, that the governor and officials from her administration had been working closely with shippers and cargo carriers — including Hawaiian Airlines, Pacific Air Cargo, Young Brothers and others — to help develop contingency plans for alternative services. The latter alternatives included adding flights and service, bringing in new aircraft, and linking businesses with appropriate cargo carriers that have capacity to meet shipping needs.

Then we learned of the impending Aloha and GMAC deal with Seattle-based Saltchuk Resources, the parent company of interisland ocean shipper Young Brothers, to continue the cargo services. GMAC reportedly was even open to accepting a lesser amount from Saltchuk because the Federal Aviation Administration said it was willing to expedite the certification necessary to run cargo. As of this writing, we understand that the plan is for Saltchuk to operate under Aloha's operating certificate until Saltchuk can ob-

tain its own certificate in about two weeks.

So, while a resolution is in sight, this situation should serve as a wake-up call to every isle resident and business, particularly in Maui County. We need to develop long-term solutions so that we are not boxed in continually and left in turmoil when a business closes or an element of the economy takes a hit.

We must continue to plan for the future; support our key industries; diversify our economy; expand our infrastructure, including our commercial harbor; cultivate shipping alternatives because transportation lines are critical; create food self-sufficiency, because a lot of produce is shipped in and we have no dairy or egg farms on island; reduce our dependency on fossil fuels, in order to address rising costs and reduce our environmental footprint; and make our county more sustainable.

In these tenuous economic times, it is the perfect opportunity, especially before the coming election, to call upon our leaders to focus on the economy, present proactive approaches, chart a new path and take action. It is time to jump out of the box and not be "stuck" — and to plan ahead for a sustainable economic future.

■ Pamela Tumpap is president of the Maui Chamber of Commerce.