

Chamber proposes processes that build consensus, end in solutions

THE CHAMBER VIEW
by Pamela Tumpap



There is growing concern among those who regularly participate in public hearings, testify,

listen to many of the discussions, and watch as decisions are made and legislation is written. The concern is that our existing processes can contribute to polarization instead of consensus building, and can hamper us from finding winning solutions.

As an example, we participated at the recent state Commission on Water Resource Management hearing, where testimony was taken from 5 to 9 p.m. on the use of stream water in 19 East Maui streams. About 60 testifiers had signed up to testify. It was a long but important night, and much of the crowd stayed for the entire meeting.

There was no time limit on testimony, such as the three-minute rule typically in place when providing testimony at County Council meetings; thus, many who testified early got to speak for a much longer period of time, well beyond three minutes, while those at the end were encouraged continuously to be brief. Although the meeting went over the allotted time, all who signed up got to testify and convey necessary information from all

sides.

So why would we say this method presents a challenge? During the four hours of testimony, many individuals provided testimony from their individual or group perspective, which is what public testimony is meant to do. However, the process has limitations, and testimony taken in this format alone should not be the sole basis for decision making for the following reasons:

- Information presented is one directional. The format does not promote dialogue among and between parties in pursuit of answers.

- Many offer suggestions on what they feel some other entity, such as the county or Hawaiian Commercial & Sugar Co., should do. But the other parties do not have an opportunity to respond to the suggestions and to discuss what has been done or considered and why they feel the suggestions may or may not work.

- The process frequently does not allow for the correcting of misinformation. Incorrect statements are made routinely, but typically not corrected when stated, which can perpetuate the spreading of misinformation and lead to misperceptions, myths and inappropriate speculation.

- Negative declarations and pointed accusations are made, and are contrary to fostering cooperation and collaboration.

- Decision makers can be swept up by the numbers game, viewing large crowds on one side of an issue as an indi-

cation of the community's view, which may not necessarily be the case.

- Testimony at these meetings can be very emotional, as very personal issues are discussed; yet decisions should be made with our heads as well as our hearts.

- There's a sense of it's "black" or it's "white," without the vantage point of viewing the many shades of gray.

People agree it is essential to have far-reaching public feedback on topics that affect us all, but it is important to note that public hearings allow little opportunity for information to be exchanged back and forth.

The Maui Chamber of Commerce advocates processes that allow for more fact-finding, discussion and debate from all sides, and that are solutions oriented. In most, if not all, cases the greatest remedies involve some compromise. Community workshops or task forces provide for topics to be discussed and deliberated in safe, neutral environments, where information and perspectives can be shared and research can be vetted — with points clarified, misinformation corrected, dialogue provided on pros and cons, and discussion held on alternatives and concessions to arrive at successful resolutions and best practices for moving forward.

Public education on issues is also essential. The more knowledgeable we are as a community and the more information we have available, the

better informed our recommendations and ultimately our decisions will be.

These are challenging times and decision making is not an easy job. Appointed and elected officials welcome broad input to help them in the decision-making process because, ultimately, decisions are made by a few who are meant to represent us all. Leaders need and appreciate consensus to help them make excellent decisions.

Laura Thielen, chairwoman of the Commission on Water Resource Management, reminded those present at the hearing last week that we did not have to wait for the commission, made up of both Maui and non-Maui residents, to come back in December and render a decision for our community. She stated that we could continue to communicate with the commission and work toward community agreement in the meantime to find our own answers.

The suggestion seems obvious, but too often we do not get to that end before decisions are rendered. Now that the many perspectives have been heard and a myriad of suggestions has been made, we can work on balanced solutions. This chamber is reaching out to other organizations in the hopes of making that happen. We welcome your comments and suggestions.

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