

## OUR VIEW

### TOURISM ECONOMY

# Green fee needed, but beware pitfalls

**H**awaii leaders have been contemplating the enactment of a “green fee” for several years to enable better care of the state’s natural and cultural resources, many of them under duress from increased use by island visitors. There have been smaller visitor charges collected as admissions to certain attractions, such as Diamond Head State Monument and Haena State Park.

Last year, a push to broaden the reach of the fee stalled in conference committee. The criticism throughout the process centered on the uncertain effects on a still-struggling tourism sector with concern that a new tax could hurt an industry crucial to the local economy. That persistent worry still remains for those who have opposed this year’s version, House Bill 2406.

But then the wildfire disaster happened on Maui, tragically making the case that the state could no longer afford to wait. The disaster, fueled by persistent drought, sharpened public awareness of the repercussions of climate change and that providing funds to address them is extremely urgent.

It also should require that lawmakers concentrate public money on the mission, rather than turn the initiative into a state jobs program.

The state Department of Land and Natural Resources has requested six positions be funded through the bill. Legislators should be skeptical that these are needed. Providing resources to a known priority doesn’t justify creating excessive staff positions to manage them.

HB 2406, poised to cross over to the Senate, would bolster the state’s efforts by adding a \$25 fee to the transient accommodations tax (TAT) that is required of businesses that rent rooms to visitors. This is in addition to the basic room tax and each county’s public-transit surcharge that’s assessed.

The current version of the measure has merit and deserves further discussion. It would establish the Climate Health and Environmental Action Fund to collect the added \$25 levied on transient accommodations.

Here are a few of the numerous prescribed purposes for the funds:

- >> Wildfire prevention and response strategies, focused on “environmentally beneficial” strategies such as removal of non-native grasses and other invasive species known to help fuel those fires.

- >> Flood prevention.

- >> Coral reef and fisheries protections.

- >> Shoreline adaptation to deal with sea-level rise.

The bill was a major element in Gov. Josh Green’s legislative package this session. The \$25 amount was dialed back from the \$50 green fee the governor has favored in the past.

Strong support for the measure came from the environmental nonprofit sector, for one. Lea Hong, Hawaii state director of the Trust for Public Land, submitted testimony estimating that “an additional \$360 million annually is needed to close the budget shortfall in protecting our islands against climate threats and impacts to tourism.

“Our tourism-dependent economy and our natural/cultural resources are inextricably linked – climate disasters like the Maui fires have devastating effects on our families and our economy,” Hong rightly added. “For too long, needed and critical investments in our natural/climate infrastructure have been deferred for lack of funding.”

Other proponents of the bill cited estimates of the damage that can result from climate disasters. One came from the Hawai’i Climate Change Mitigation and Adaptation Commission, which put the losses from chronic flooding through this century at \$19 billion statewide.

Such stunning figures underscore why the public should see establishing this protective environmental fund for what it is: an investment, one that is needed but must be managed and used wisely.