



COURTESY WRNS STUDIO

This rendering, for illustrative purposes and not the final design, offers an idea of what teacher workforce housing on the Mililani High School campus could be like. Nonprofit developer Pacific Housing Assistance Corp. is partnering with the state School Facilities Authority to work on this project.

Better housing options, better teachers

By Brian Canevari and Logan Okita

ISLAND VOICES



Brian Canevari is the Hawaii School Facilities Authority (SFA) program manager responsible for workforce housing; Logan Okita is vice president of the Hawaii State Teachers Association and a former SFA board member.

Teachers shape the lives of our children and influence their future. We do a disservice to our children if we do not address the state's ongoing teacher shortage so that students from pre-kindergarten to grade 12 can have a quality education.

Only about half of Hawaii's public school teachers remain in the profession after their first five years. The turnover rate sometimes outpaces retirements, exacerbating the shortage of teachers. Not surprisingly, the primary reason for the high turnover is Hawaii's high cost of living. Many teachers simply find it too difficult to live on a teacher's salary, especially with our state's high cost of housing.

In 2013, Hawaii's legislators came up with an innovative idea: optimize the use of existing spaces on school campuses and other public land for workforce housing, expedite building processes, and generate new revenue for the state through public-private partnerships with developers. That vision is unfolding, but there is much more we can do to advance this vision.

A survey commissioned by the Hawaii Department of Education (DOE) in April 2024 revealed there is strong demand for rental workforce housing:

- >> 41% of the respondents are likely to leave the DOE due to housing costs.

- >> 54% are interested in employee

workforce housing.

- >> 75% of non-homeowners are likely to consider signing a lease if suitable rental housing for employees became available.

A Hawaii State Teachers Association (HSTA) survey showed similar sentiments among teachers. A majority of educators agree workforce housing rentals would keep them from leaving the profession.

The annual salary for teachers just beginning their career with the DOE is currently slightly more than \$53,000. With deductions for health insurance premiums and other debt payments, a teacher could realistically afford between \$1,200 to \$1,400 a month.

Thanks to the support of our legislators, Hawaii is making headway to address this thorny issue. To date, \$5 million has been secured to build the state's first teacher workforce housing project on the Mililani High

School campus, and another \$2 million was appropriated this past legislative session. This additional funding is now with Gov. Josh Green for approval. If all goes as planned, this workforce housing project will be ready for occupancy in 2030.

The Hawaii School Facilities Authority (SFA) has already identified 25 potential workforce housing sites statewide, based on set criteria, including teacher demand for workforce housing and student enrollment in the area, both informed by DOE data.

These sites are also close to public transportation, located in vibrant communities with shopping and dining, near recreational facilities, and comply with current zoning restrictions.

SFA is determined to reach its goal of building 2,500 rental housing units to serve 10% of Hawaii's DOE educator workforce by 2030 to help more teachers remain in their profession.

We must continue to build more workforce housing, but we cannot stop there. HSTA recommends a multipronged approach to teacher recruitment and retention.

We must also provide housing assistance to teachers; raise teacher wages; and provide 100% employer-covered medical insurance. These will be key to attracting the 1,200 to 1,500 teachers needed each year to serve communities across our islands. Hawaii's children deserve the best education possible. Let's serve as innovative, collaborative role models to inspire them.