

Mililani teacher housing complex on track for 2027

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Hawaii's first affordable workforce housing project designed specifically for public school teachers has cleared a milestone after two years of planning, redesigns and community outreach.

The Hawaii School Facilities Authority announced that the final environmental assessment for Kumelewai Hale, a 95-unit affordable rental housing project planned on the campus of Mililani High School, has been completed. The milestone allows nonprofit developer Pacific Housing Assistance Corporation to move forward with permitting, financing and final design work.

Although the development will be on Mililani High School property, project officials said residents and students will have limited interaction. The housing complex will have its own entrance from Meheula Parkway and will be separated from school operations by fencing and security measures.

Construction is expected to begin in late 2027, with the first residents projected to move into the development mid-2029.

The project is intended to help address one of the state Department of Education's most persistent challenges — recruiting and retaining teachers amid Hawaii's high cost of living.

"The project is special because it's really intended for teachers," Lacey Shimabukuro, development project manager for Pacific Housing Assistance Corporation, said. "It's to help the DOE so that our kids in classrooms have consistent

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teachers that are hopefully not moving to the mainland.”

The development’s progress comes after significant changes to the original proposal.

In 2024, the School Facilities Authority issued a request for proposals seeking developers to create affordable rental housing for teachers. Pacific Housing was selected later that year after conducting focus groups with current and future educators to better understand their housing needs and priorities.

The original proposal called for a 109-unit building on a portion of the Mililani High School campus occupied by the school’s agriculture program. However, the location generated opposition from residents and school community members who were concerned about the loss of educational space and increased traffic near a busy intersection.

“There was a lot of push-back,” said Cheri Nakamura, policy and program officer for the School Facilities Authority.

Nakamura said community members repeatedly expressed support for teacher housing while objecting to the proposed site.

“The school community and the broader community were not thrilled with that location,” she said. “They kept saying, ‘We’re not against teacher housing. We want to help recruit and retain teachers, but that particular place is not in line with the community’s desire.’”

The School Facilities Authority and Pacific Housing spent months meeting with neighborhood boards, school leaders and residents before relocating the project to a site closer to the school’s athletic facilities, an area that had been identified as a potential location in the original request for proposals.

Relocating the project to a site near the school’s athletic facilities required multiple design revisions and reduced the number of planned units from 109 to 95.

Nakamura said the project’s early challenges prompted SFA to place a greater emphasis on proactive outreach and communication with community stakeholders as similar projects move forward.

The approximately \$80 million project will consist primarily of one- and two-bedroom apartments in a five-story building with four levels of residential units above a parking structure. Planned amenities include a fitness center, recreation space, a children’s playground, a teacher



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Kumelewai Hale, Hawaii’s first teacher workforce housing project, is planned for the Mililani High School campus. The 95-unit affordable rental housing development is expected to serve state Department of Education teachers and staff.

resource room and pet-friendly accommodations.

Many of those features were developed directly from teacher feedback gathered during focus groups.

Among the requests from educators was a shared resource space where teachers could prepare classroom materials and collaborate outside of school hours.

“The teachers said that they had to go to school early to use the copy machines and lamination machine,” Shimabukuro said. “We wanted to create an area where teachers can gather and share their ideas and work together on projects that will be for their classes.”

Project leaders also are

considering programs focused on financial literacy and homeownership education.

Priority for the apartments will be given to DOE teachers, followed by other DOE employees. If vacancies remain, units could eventually be offered to members of the public who meet income requirements.

According to Pacific Housing, rents are expected to be set below the maximum levels typically allowed for affordable housing developments, though final rent levels will depend largely on financing.

The project has received a \$2 million appropriation from the Legislature to

support pre-development work. Additional state funding or grants could help reduce borrowing costs and allow rents to be lowered further, project officials said.

The DOE 2024 Employee Housing Survey found that 35% of DOE employees are cost-burdened by housing expenses, affecting both renters and homeowners. Employees struggling with housing costs were also more likely to identify themselves as a retention risk, with 41% of respondents saying they were likely to leave their job because of housing costs. The challenges were particularly pronounced among newer

employees: 43% of workers with less than five years of service reported being cost-burdened, while 49% identified themselves as retention risks.

The survey also found strong interest in workforce housing, with Mililani ranking as the most desirable location on Oahu among respondents, followed by Kaneohe and Kapolei.

With the environmental review now complete, Nakamura said the project is entering its next phase.

“The next phase is going to be permit applications,” she said.

For leaders, the development represents more than just a housing project.

As Hawaii’s first teacher workforce housing initiative, it is also being viewed as a test case for future public-private partnerships on state land.

Nakamura recently highlighted the project at Hawaii’s inaugural Public-Private Partnership Summit, where she shared lessons learned from the planning process and community outreach efforts. Officials hope the development can serve as a model for future workforce housing projects aimed at supporting essential workers.

“We want it to be an example of what can be done in a different way,” Nakamura said.