

Op-ed: HALE Hawai'i by Cara Flores

Prioritize the community or the economy?

Our state faces an impossible dilemma. Our elected representatives want to choose the community but they worry about the "cost" - and rightfully so. Without tourism providing revenue to Hawai'i, how will people who work in the industry get by? A legitimate question that we need to find answers to. The current proposed solution is to welcome tourists back. This solution is the "easy" answer, but the wrong one. This is no different than what we as a state have always done. Rely on tourism. It's quite possible that much of our state representation feels this is the appropriate solution as well; during and after a worldwide pandemic that has and will continue to crush tourism. HALE Hawai'i, is an organization formed by community that believes in creative solutions which could benefit the economy with the priority always being to #ProtectHawai'i.

We remove our ability to keep Hawai'i COVID19 free if we choose to welcome tourism too soon and while the mainland is still experiencing spikes in cases. Why can't being COVID19 free be the goal? Dire consequences will be a result of this decision, and will not "save" our quickly declining local economy. If we learn from the mainland, we can measure that this plan will likely cause more harm to the economy and unnecessarily kill more people, more quickly. In addition to more lives lost, the state will respond with a second shutdown going back to the "safer at home" protocol, and causing some businesses to shut down permanently.

If we allow travelers to bypass quarantine with insufficient tests, we are guaranteed to have community spread. With increased community spread, our cases can be forecasted to multiply into triple digits, we have increased fatalities, and survivors who suffer temporary and even permanent disabilities as a result of infection. Most people will be too anxious to leave their homes or spend money in local economy as cases increase. Tourism will dry up as we lose our reputation as being a safe place to vacation. Tourism industry workers will be expected to put their lives at risk for a paycheck. We risk the health of our children and their families just so they can attend school. Children will need to be constantly physically distanced at school and have to

wear masks. Our keiki cannot safely have playdates, play sports or do any extra-curricular activities. They cannot be normal children. Teachers and staff should never have to risk their lives, or the lives of their own families, in order to fulfill their callings. Three of the best teachers my kids ever had were in their 60's, they perfected the art of teaching. I would choose to bankrupt my family before putting their lives on the line. Children are the future, teachers are the people who train them up and guide them to greatness. It is very short-sighted to risk the lives of some of our most prized members of society for a very temporary, slight increase in revenue.

We need to accept that the pandemic and post-pandemic is going to be a long-term problem and needs creative long-term solutions. We need radical solutions to radical problems. It is heartbreaking that we'd ever consider needlessly putting precious lives in danger. For tourism and economic reasons? People are our greatest asset - people over profit! We only hear business reasons for opening and frankly those reasons pale in comparison to protecting the people in our community. We need to stop discussing how many cases would be enough for us to handle as if human lives and the freedom to live in our state without the threat of COVID19 has a price!

If we use creative solutions we can make a way for our economy to work, we can do this while minimizing suffering and maximizing health protection. HALE Hawai'i has many objectives in bringing workable solutions and ideas to the table from people in the community who want to see Hawaii survive and thrive, even if we don't have tourism for awhile.

One solution in particular would be to approach tech companies and encourage them to have employees temporarily move to Hawai'i and work remotely. This would protect their employee's health and safety while also helping to boost our economy. We could offer STVR, a temporary property tax break if they participate in this program and temporarily rent out vacation rentals while bringing "long term vacationers" to our islands.

If we can improve the quarantine effectiveness enough to keep our cases in the single digits then we could realistically stop all community transmission. That would make

Hawai'i an extremely desirable location to work in worldwide. We could make agreements with other locations who also have no COVID19 community spread. We can encourage them to allow their residents to vacation in Hawai'i. We can have an exemption from quarantine for those who reside in a location with no community spread for at the past 30 days. This would allow us to have some tourism without putting our community in danger.

Another solution is to charge a tourism fee to help cover the costs of a better quarantine, such as quarantine hotels. As the number of COVID19 are reduced, this fee could be used to keep cost of living reasonable for residents. There are many other ways to increase revenue and decrease costs.

We need some major creativity to fix our budget. We can solve complex problems with complex solutions. The solution is not opening tourism during the peak of a pandemic. It is irrational, irresponsible and doing so simply demonstrates a lazily poorly thought-out solution. It goes against all expert advice including the CDC. We must do everything we can to #ProtectHawai'i and the community and economic health we have right now. It is the right thing to do and we are the only state that could realistically and completely eliminate community spread in our state. We have a moral obligation to do that and to start getting extremely creative to solve our state and individual economic problems.