

ISLANDER INSTITUTE

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An open letter to Hawai'i leaders participating in COVID-19 economic recovery planning
from Andrew Aoki, Islander Institute

Aloha. I am writing to express some ideas that I think are important to consider as you make critical decisions in the coming weeks and months, decisions that will surely affect everyone in Hawai'i today and for generations to come. This memo contains a recipe for getting through the crisis and building a stronger Hawai'i by returning to our values.

Through colleagues and public reports, I have only bits and pieces of the official processes in which you are all engaged. I don't claim to know all the relevant parts of your difficult, wide-ranging and serious conversations. I only know that the conversations are indeed difficult, wide-ranging and serious, having been inside those rooms myself in the past. Instead, I humbly write to you from the perspective of many people outside those rooms, reflecting on my over 20 years of work in policy, politics, planning, and community engagement across our islands.

#1 - THE MOST IMPORTANT THING: Everything points to health

If we didn't understand it before, we should all now be convinced that health is our most important societal value. We know this because we intentionally shut down the islands and brought economic pain into our lives to protect our community from COVID-19.

Now we are reeling with uncertainty, fear, depression, anger, lost savings, lost opportunities, lost jobs, hunger, illness, and death, all either caused by COVID-19 or the response to it. We are physically separated from the people and places we love. We are straining to stick together in this fight against an invisible enemy. As we carry all this suffering and try to heal one another, it's impossible to forget that simple truth: *Health is always the most important thing.*

This current crisis is revealing just how much we have been neglecting our health as a society. COVID-19 is a life-threatening epidemic, but it also exploits pre-existing epidemics of poverty and job instability, homelessness and inadequate housing, untreated mental illness, domestic violence, discrimination and injustice, hunger, hopelessness, loneliness, overwork, loss of place, loss of culture, chronic disease, and unsteady access to healthcare. This virus, which jumps from human to human without regard to class or status, is telling us that we are in this together *whether we like it or not.*

Our health is connected to one another. We are only as healthy as the most vulnerable among us.

So if our first priority is to secure the health and safety of Hawai'i, it doesn't just end by addressing COVID-19 with screening, testing, tracking, and quarantine. That is only the first step to get us out of our homes. In order to *fully* secure the health and safety of Hawai'i, we need to continue the current momentum of our government, businesses, and communities, along with whatever recovery dollars we have, to address the many vulnerabilities in our islands.

#2 - THE GOAL: Build a health foundation for all

Talk of Hawai‘i’s economic recovery efforts seem to be hovering around two narratives. 1) Either the plan is to contain the spread of COVID-19 so that we can flip the switch and return to how things were. Or, 2) based on public statements made by the various groups, the plan is to parlay this recovery into a wholesale transformation and diversification of Hawai‘i’s economy.

The first narrative seems like an obviously bad idea because although many of us would desperately love a return to our lives before COVID-19, we would end up cementing an economy that drew down on community health and left much of our population vulnerable in the first place. That economy also drained things money can’t buy, like the health of our environment and the spirit of our communities. Such an approach would inevitably be compared to an “economic bailout,” and would be neither popular with the public nor effective in the short or long run.

The second narrative of big change is exciting to many. I have been an advocate for such change for many years, have written or participated in many of those big plans, and am hopeful such a transformation happens soon. But I do not believe industry-focused restructuring should be the driving goal or even the framework of your current efforts for two reasons:

1. *Legitimacy.* Given the urgency of your work and the state of public trust, the outcome of such a planning effort is not likely to be deemed legitimate by large sections of the community. This is not the time, nor is there time to appropriately engage the stakeholders (i.e., the community) in such a process, and therefore the individuals and interests initially invited into the planning are likely to dominate the outcome. Furthermore, the Hawai‘i 2050 Sustainability Plan—which is being talked about as a starting point and which I participated in—may have some good elements, but it is not an adequate plan or structure to work from right now because it lacks currency, real legitimacy, and integration of its parts into a holistic view of society.
2. *Scale.* Even if there were time to create an economic transformation plan with widespread input and agreement, the scope would be too big and inappropriate for the situation we are in right now, which includes looming holes in state and county budgets, an unstable federal response, upcoming elections, a possible global depression, and an ongoing pandemic that is not yet fully understood and for which there is no vaccine.

What is needed now is a plan that has a valuable, timely, and clear goal toward which we can all strive together as we restart our activities. The plan should be informed by the values of Hawai‘i, with an eye toward the general directions that have been articulated in countless prior plans.

To make Hawai‘i safe and healthy, the one goal now should be to ensure that everyone has the basic foundation for a healthy life.

This might seem basic and banal, but let’s be clear: despite the fact that this has been a political rallying cry for decades, we have never achieved this goal even in good times, let alone in the midst of a global emergency with limited resources. Securing the basics for all would transform our economy and society, and it would focus our collective efforts on our highest priority—our health. This task is not as daunting as it may seem because many of us already have most if not all the ingredients

for a healthy life. So we are really talking about focusing the rebuilding effort on those of us who have lost that foundation to COVID-19 and those of us who didn't have it in the first place. Unfortunately, at this point, we are likely talking about more than half of our population. Whatever strides can be made toward this goal will improve our chances for a lasting prosperity.

The basics for a healthy life include:

1. **A good job** that affords security, hope, and time to live a good life
2. **Food** that is healthy and available even in times of crisis
3. **Housing** that is safe and available to all
4. **Healthcare** that is available when you need it
5. **Social justice** that breeds fairness and heals current and past wrongs
6. **Connection to place** that ties us to the health of our islands
7. **Connection to community** that fosters positive relationships with one another
8. **Investment in keiki** that gives them a promising future because of sacrifices we make today
9. **Support for kūpuna** that keeps them healthy and honors their sacrifices of yesterday

There is no justifiable reason to deny anyone these basic things in 21st century Hawai'i. From where we stand today to where we need to be, one can see the possibility of a "New Deal" style package of policies, programs, partnerships, investments, and regulations to catalyze the economic and community actions necessary to pull us through this crisis and move us into the future. For example, in healthcare, we can start with an effective system of COVID-19 management that spans all islands with screening, testing, tracking, and quarantine supports, and from there we could build a robust public health infrastructure that addresses health system practices, universal insurance coverage, and social determinants of health. As another example, in support for kūpuna, we could make sure the current incredible, organic outpouring of formal and informal kūpuna assistance doesn't dissipate, and turn it into a robust, permanent network of community care that reaches all vulnerable seniors. With government, businesses, and communities working together, even in crisis, we can build great things.

#3 - THE WAY: Humility, courage, and aloha

If achieving these objectives sounds impossible, COVID-19 is teaching Hawai'i otherwise. Government and industry made a clear values statement by putting the health of our people ahead of the interests of tourists and their own bottom lines. Many businesses are doing the right things just because. Powerful community movements are in motion to make masks and ventilators, rally around our keiki and kūpuna, feed the hungry, and solve problems that have gone unaddressed. And of critical importance, we are finally beginning to acknowledge a mostly unseen class of often underpaid, underequipped, and underappreciated workers for the essential value that they bring to all our lives. Just like a hurricane or flood, COVID-19 is turning Hawai'i into a community again.

That being said, we need to be honest with people about the severity of what is to come. This crisis is ongoing, and it could easily get much, much worse. Just saying "we are all in this together" does not actually bring people together, especially when some people are hurting and sacrificing much more

than others. For many reasons past and present, public trust right now is dangerously low just at a time when we need extraordinary unity of purpose and action. The people don't have enough trust in their leaders, and in return, leaders display little trust in the people.

Hawai'i leaders need to build considerably more public trust as quickly as possible. I think this can happen by making one critical change in approach. From my vantage point, which I believe many share, leadership in this crisis has been highly centralized, top-down, often patronizing, and infused with a charity mindset. There is obvious disunity among different public leaders, and the organization is siloed in a way that is basically impenetrable. In a word, it is paternalistic as has often been the case in Hawai'i going back to plantation days.

A simple critical change would be to dial down the paternalism and dial up the maternalism. This means actually *being* in this together using the power of quiet sacrifice, nurturing, openness, honesty, perseverance, and humility.

I'm not saying it isn't happening. I'm saying it needs to happen more. One way to improve the current effort would be to have more women designing processes, leading discussions, and making decisions. In the same vein, there should be far more participation by leaders from islands other than O'ahu, with a constant push to decentralize appropriate parts of the recovery and engage the agency of individuals and communities. Finally, such profound decisions for Hawai'i cannot be made without Native Hawaiian voices and values serving in a preeminent role.

We in Hawai'i aren't perfect, but we are good. Good people look for the good in other people. Good people try their best with the resources they have even in the face of setbacks. Good people feel they owe something to one another and so they share generously. Good people don't need to be told what to do; they will do the right thing even when they have junk options. Good people of Hawai'i, with good leaders at all levels, will walk into the abyss with humility, courage, and aloha.

These are the leadership values that will form a new Hawai'i. It must be birthed from unconditional aloha for our islands and for one another. And it can only be created by everyone *actually* working together. Mahalo for the opportunity to share these thoughts. I wish you great wisdom and great health. Mālama pono.