



## Flying into the future

### Planning begins for \$68 million in improvements to Kona airport

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Passengers want ambiance and comfort.

Airport officials want safety and security.

As the master planning process begins for upgrades at the Kona International Airport, stakeholders are coming together to see how they can incorporate all those concerns into an improved West Hawaii flying experience.



Illustration by Michael Gifford | West Hawaii Today

"It's an aged facility that we have out there," Department of Transportation Director Barry Fukunaga said at a Governor's West Hawaii Council of Advisors meeting. "Times have changed. Travel patterns have changed."

Specifically, many of the airports on the neighbor islands were designed to be part of a spoke-hub system, with direct flights first landing in Honolulu and travelers catching interisland flights to reach their final destination. The growing number of direct flights has put a strain on those smaller airports.

To address the problem, the state is working on a \$2.3 billion airports modernization plan. Fukunaga and DOT Airports Deputy Director Brian Sekiguchi brought some details of the proposal, which includes about \$68 million for the Kona airport, to Kailua-Kona on Tuesday evening.

Short-term changes include new flight information display systems and new signs around the airport, Sekiguchi said.

District airport manager Chauncey Wong Yuen is also working to increase parking capacity at the airport. The first step in that process is shifting employee parking to another area on airport grounds and allowing travelers to park in the old employee lot.

Resident Marni Herkes told the officials she would like to see changes made to the airport's waiting area.

"We have a lot of people that live here and work on the mainland," Herkes said. "There's nothing to do but sit in a dirty, unlit waiting place. It's very uncomfortable out there when you have a late flight."

Wong Yuen said he already has an engineering team coming to the airport this week to look at the waiting areas to address some of those problems. The airport's contract with concessionaires requires those businesses to be open only 16 hours a day, from 5:30 a.m. to 9:30 p.m. That contract is up for renewal later this year, he said.

Travelers shouldn't expect to see major construction for at least three years, Sekiguchi said. The master planning process, which can take one to two years, begins with a public meeting at 6:30 p.m. March 7 at Kealakehe Elementary School.

That process is followed by an environmental impact statement, selection of a design and then construction.

Advisory council members raised several concerns about the possible exterior of an enclosed airport.

"I would hate to see our airport look like one in Kansas City or Cleveland," said resident Beverly Byouk. "Give (visitors) that Hawaiian experience with music, the smells of flowers."

Sekiguchi said giving travelers a "sense of place" when they arrive at the airport was a priority.

Wong Yuen said his top concern is passenger safety. He would like to see enclosed jetways, which would help prevent falls while boarding or exiting airplanes. In the last month, two travelers using the movable stairways fell and suffered serious head injuries, he said.

Passenger comfort is an issue, too, on rainy days when travelers get wet, then ride as far as from Kona to Chicago nonstop, he added.

In addition to the possibility of jetways, other long-term improvements at the airport include combining the security checkpoints into

one location and creating new waiting areas for outbound passengers. The Federal Aviation Administration is working on a new control tower for the airport. A new fire station and training facility may also be in the airport's future.

Advisor council member Estela Halverson said she would like to see a people-mover system included in the plans.

"There isn't an airport on this island that is friendly to seniors and the disabled," Halverson said. "If you're going to make this airport bigger, please make it decent for people who are disabled or are seniors."

Council member Elaine Watai said she wondered if the state weren't rushing too quickly to pay for airport improvements when the Hawaii Superferry might take some of the airlines' business.

"I'm Kona," Watai said. "There's a lot of us who don't travel too much because we can't afford to."

The Superferry might change that, she said.

Fukunaga said he did not believe the two transport modes would compete for the same customers.

"Their market is different from the airport," he said. "It's not for everybody. Unless you're planning on an extended stay, it may not be as cost-effective as catching a plane, renting a car."

Fukunaga said he would like to see the airport retain what makes it special to arriving travelers.

"The character of that airport is so unique and emblematic of this part of the world," he said.

The plan

- Short-term projects to be completed within the next five years:

- \* Increase passenger service by upgrading terminal facilities and expanding the public parking facility.
- \* Increase operational efficiency by resurfacing taxiways and replacing airfield lighting and signage.
- \* Increase security by modernizing the security access control and video monitoring systems, constructing an in-line Explosive Detection System and improving the airport perimeter road and fence.
- \* Improve storm water drainage systems.
- \* Construct an Aircraft Rescue and Fire Fighting Regional Training facility.

- Long-term projects to be completed within five to 12 years:

- \* Construct wide-body aircraft gates accessible by jet bridges.
- \* Construct new ticket lobby and baggage claim facility.
- \* Develop plans for a new Federal Inspection Services facility.
- \* Construct a new, centralized passenger security checkpoint.

Source: Airport Modernization Plan

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