

Mayor's plan for water supply has support at budget hearing

By MELISSA TANJI, Staff Writer

Thursday, April 13, 2006 11:30 AM

WAILUKU – More than 200 residents gathered at the Maui County Council Chambers Wednesday night to listen and to testify on behalf of programs, services and projects they would like to see included in the county's 2007 budget.

More than 60 people signed up to comment on Mayor Alan Arakawa's proposed \$467.5 million county budget – which includes property tax rate cuts and major capital projects, such as acquiring Waihee water system intakes, constructing a Haiku Fire Station complex and getting a new county morgue.

Several speakers supported the administration's proposal for \$7 million to acquire the former Wailuku Agribusiness water intakes and systems, diverting stream water from Waihee to Waikapu.

Retired English professor Victor Pellegrino, a Waikapu farmer and a member of a water rights group, Hui O Na Wai Eha, told council members the mayor's plan will protect streams that have been drained by the plantation diversions.

"What we need to do immediately is restore in-stream flow standards – in all four streams," he said.

He said the county needs "to prevent corporate greed from taking water" and recharge the aquifers by allowing dammed water to be released from "its prison" to flow in the streams of Waihee, Iao, Waiehu and Waikapu.

"It's in the best interest of all of us," said Pellegrino.

He said the ball is now in the council's court with the state Legislature rejecting a \$10 million request to help the county acquire the water intakes and watersheds.

Arakawa's budget request has the county putting up \$7 million in bond funds with the expectation of \$10 million in state funds for the acquisitions.

County Water Director George Tengan told council members on Monday that the county still can seek to acquire the intakes with the \$7 million in county funds.

Waihee resident Gordon Schwartz, who was scheduled to testify late in the evening, said before the meeting that water "is a public resource." Schwartz, who lives at the Waihee River mouth and is also a member of Na Wai Eha, said he has seen the water flow decrease where he lives.

The meeting at the Kalana O Maui Building also drew social service agencies advocating for programs supported by the county, headed by Maui Economic Opportunity officials and program participants speaking of the programs they use.

Loretta Kepa, 67, of Kahului, gave emotional testimony that had the audience laughing in support of her appeal.

"Without the help of MEO, I wouldn't be able to smile . . . They helped me get my dentures when I needed it," she said.

Kepa, a great-grandmother, advocated for MEO's various programs, saying they have helped her, her family and even her great-granddaughter, Anuhea, 4, who is enrolled in MEO's Head Start program.

Colin McCormick, of Kihei, said before the meeting he would speak in support of establishing a county environmental center at a beach house acquired by the county to resolve the Montana Beach dispute over a condominium project near Baldwin Beach Park.

McCormick, who has a degree in botany and biology from the University of Hawaii, said the place has "got a lot of potential." An environmental center can educate tourists and the community about Maui's environment, he said.

Erin Yokote, a 15-year-old Wailuku resident who testified along with other teens as a part of Focus Maui Nui's Youth Alliance, told council members that she would like to see more affordable housing built on Maui.

Yokote said many homes are called "affordable" but are in the \$300,000 to \$400,000 range – out of the reach of young workers.

"Is this what we define as affordable?" she asked.

She said along with homes, the county needs to keep up with the infrastructure: roads, water, sewers and other utilities.

The council's Budget and Finance Committee is reviewing the budget Arakawa submitted March 15. Council members have until the end of May to approve their version of a budget that goes into effect July 1.

The council Budget and Finance Committee continues its nearly daily meetings with a session scheduled at 9 a.m. today in the Council Chambers.

Melissa Tanji can be reached at mtanji@mauinews.com.