

COMMENTARY

Future plans must focus on Hawaii's youth

By Dean Uchida

Perhaps it was the collective gasp that went through the ballroom or the eerie silence that followed that quickly got my attention. These were nine Hawai'i high school students, most of them seniors, who were asked how many of them saw themselves living and working in Hawai'i when they were 35 years old.

No one raised a hand. The nine students, members of The Advertiser's Teen Editorial Board, were part of the unveiling of the draft 2050 Sustainability Plan in September of this year. It is ironic that the next generation, who should be the focus of the plan for Hawai'i's future, do not see themselves in Hawai'i's future. It begs the question then if we are not planning for the next generation, who or what are we planning for?

As a parent, my initial reaction was bittersweet. On the one hand, I was pleased to see how these young adults had their own visions, aspirations and dreams to pursue their own interests and careers on the Mainland. On the other hand, I began to realize that my own daughter and son, who are also in high school, probably feel the same.

I suppose it is something that we all acknowledge but never really accept. We all know of young adults, both friends and relatives, who want to advance themselves through opportunities provided on the Mainland. I guess deep down in our hearts we hope that they all come back to Hawai'i to live and work. You never really think about your own children in that situation.

Or perhaps many parents in Hawai'i have already accepted that their children will be living and working away from Hawai'i.

After giving it more thought and as someone concerned about Hawai'i's future, I was quite frankly troubled. The nine had all spoken earlier about how they truly believed that they were very lucky to be born and raised in Hawai'i. However, the reality is these are nine public and private high school students, which may be a small sample of the best and brightest that we have, who did not see any future for themselves in Hawai'i.

Two primary reasons were given: no prospects of high-quality, knowledge-based jobs in Hawai'i; and lack of housing that they thought they could afford.

It all became clear to me when, while the crowd was still murmuring from the response, the students were asked what they wanted to say to the audience in the room that day. One of the nine simply said, "Give us hope." Give us hope that we can return to Hawai'i to raise our children the way we have been raised, and to have our children experience all that it is to grow up in Hawai'i.

Families, businesses, and community leaders should all be concerned. As the world becomes more and more complicated and challenging, we are in need of strong, intelligent leaders to help shape our future. What will happen if we are unable to attract and retain our best and brightest? How do we make Hawai'i a "cool place to live?" How do we create hope and opportunities for our young professionals who go away for school and other experiences to return to live and work in Hawai'i?

Emotions are still running high as we all struggle to deal with the Superferry. However, as many have observed, the issue was never really about the Superferry but rather all that it represents. The Superferry seemed to have been the one thing that effectively served as the tipping point in a strange convergence of multiple issues.

Most reasonable people know that protecting the environment and providing economic opportunities for the next generation are not mutually exclusive goals. The challenge is to balance our needs for environmental protection with our desires to provide for the next generation. If we don't, who are we protecting the environment for?

The Superferry just happened to be the issue of the day that exposed the growing unrest on how we individually versus collectively define our quality of life. Regardless of your feelings on these highly charged issues, we should all give pause and question how our actions and decisions today will create opportunities and give the next generation hope.

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