

NAME IN THE NEWS

Jim Dator

UH's director of Futures Studies says Hawaii's future depends on developing sustainable industries, not relying on tourism and military

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Jim Dator doesn't predict the future, he prepares for it. And the director of the Hawaii Research Center for Futures Studies says that as much as Hawaii residents may bid good riddance to the rocky first decade of the new millennium, and assume that 2010 can only be better, that prospect is far from certain.



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The end of the first decade of the 21st century seems like a good time to check in with UH futurist Jim Dator, who assesses Hawaii's economic and social prospects. Above, Dator posed for a photograph on his condominium lanai in Waikiki.

"I don't want to sound too negative, but there are some very worrisome factors," said the University of Hawaii professor, whose center is affiliated with the UH political science department.

Hawaii, dependent as it is on tourism, military spending and imported oil, must develop ways to sustain itself or remain buffeted by outside forces, said Dator, 76, who joined the UH faculty in 1969.

Besides teaching, he advises governmental, military, business, educational, religious and public-interest organizations around the world, often facilitating dialogue between groups that have competing or conflicting visions for the future.

His wide-ranging interests are reflected in his academic background, which includes a doctorate in political science from American University and certificates from the Virginia Theological Seminary and Yale University's Institute of Far Eastern Languages.

He and his wife, a lawyer, raised four children in the Waikiki condominium where the couple still live.

QUESTION: What will Hawaii look like in the next few decades? I don't mean just physically, but also culturally, politically, economically?

ANSWER: As a futurist, I seldom use the word "will" because that implies an ability to predict, and we can't do that. What we can do is look at all the available information and decide what scenarios seem most likely, given the wide variety of factors that affect any outcome. ... So I would say that in Hawaii we can expect the continuing demographic change in which the once-dominant Japanese group becomes smaller. ... It will be a culturally different mix than we've had in the past 20 years (with a growing percentage of Caucasians, Filipinos and Pacific Islanders). ... Hawaii has an increasingly aging population and a moderately low fertility rate, and so, combined with economic factors, we can expect a slightly lower population over the next 10 years.

Q: What about politically?

A: Going along with those demographics we can expect a continued weakening of the dominance of the Democratic Party and certainly of the liberal wing of the Democratic Party in Hawaii. However, if the economic situation eventually gets as bad as I expect that it could, then political radicalization could occur. If the worsening economic situation really gets desperate then we could see a left-wing rise or even an ultra-right swing ...

Q: Why do you think Hawaii's economy could get that bad?

A: Our major economic bases at this time are tourism and U.S. military spending and both of those are very fragile and not very good, if you are interested in local sustainability. Over the years I have been using the phrase "the unholy trinity

plus one" to describe in a metaphorical sense the concerns I have about Hawaii. These factors need to be studied as one, thought of as being integrated, rather than as separate issues. They must be dealt with together.

Q: What are they?

A: One is peak oil, or the end of oil, or the energy transformation that must come. It's suggesting, in effect, an end to oil before a comparable energy source comes online. And that certainly will affect tourism and everything else in Hawaii. Our food is shipped in. We use oil to generate our electricity. No other state is as dependent on oil as we are.

Q: What's the second factor?

A: The second is environmental issues, the questions of global climate change, global sea level rise. Absolutely nothing done in Copenhagen or anywhere else has made the slightest dent in that problem from a policy perspective. More likely than not there will be severe environmental challenges for the state and the world. It's not that Hawaii is going to be uniquely impacted, but that the availability of leisure time and money and so forth will change as the rest of the world deals with this. They just won't have as much time or money to devote to leisure travel.

Q: And the third factor?

A: The third factor is the economy itself. Since the early 1980s, the global economy ... has been growth based upon debt. This was described years ago by Bush the elder as "voodoo economics," and that, in fact, is what it is, and what the whole U.S. economy has been since then, based on the hope that people would be willing to go increasingly into debt. So the U.S. economy has been one bubble after another, based on a huge number of highly complex debt instruments that have now collapsed in a heap. And yet the very same instruments are still being used, and new debt instruments have been created, in the hope that the economy will continue to recover this way, built on more debt. But eventually the falseness of this type of economy becomes apparent and cannot be sustained.

Q: It sounds pretty grim.

A: It's extremely grim. So those are the three elements of "the unholy trinity," but let me explain the "plus one." The plus one is the fundamental inability of the American government to do anything about it. We're in a really untenable position as far as using deficit spending on the part of the government to get us out of our problems. We in Hawaii are very definitely the canary in the coal mine here, and, therefore, we need to do much, much more to become self-sufficient in terms of energy and food over the next decade.

Q: What about the short-term outlook for tourism in Hawaii? There's supposed to

be an uptick.

A: If there is a slight upturn in the economy, and if China is able somehow to continue to avoid the deep negative consequences of the global economic crisis, then tourism could see an uptick from Asia, from China. But China is also suffering from all the things I just mentioned: It's aging, it's building debt. ... So for the long term, tourism would not be our major industry

Q: What might replace it?

A: This is where the right-wing, left-wing extremism element comes into play ... I don't want the article to say that I am predicting that these things will happen. I'm just saying that the possibility that they could happen is sufficiently great that there needs to be a public discussion about how to prepare and therefore prevent this scenario.

Q: So how should we prepare?

A: Not convert more agricultural land into developments, housing, hotels — that sort of thing. We need to not only preserve our existing land but also encourage those people who want to farm to try to farm. We need to become largely self-sufficient in terms of food and basic necessities. The movement away from oil — much, much more needs to be done in that area. We should repair existing infrastructure, but to build new housing and tourist developments I don't think is a good idea now.

Q: You've written a great deal about space exploration and settlement. Are you surprised that humans have not yet built large-scale space settlements?

A: I'm not surprised, but I am disappointed, ... and this is one area where everything I am going to say is going to be at odds with everything I just said: I remain a total space fanatic, including the possibilities for space tourism, and I fully support Hawaii being a full actor in space activities.

Q: Closer to home, what do you think is in store for the University of Hawaii?

A: The administration and some faculty seem to be assuming that we are in for a very bad time economically but will bounce back fairly quickly. Boy, do I hope that's the case, and I'll be very, very pleasantly surprised, and in no way disappointed, if I'm wrong. But I just don't think the economy is going to recover in that way. I think we should be taking a hard look at what kind of university we need and renew our focus on agricultural and industrial activities to help sustain Hawaii into the future.