

Why High Rises Now?

In 1970 participants at the “Hawaii 2000” Conference recommended future housing on Oahu be based on high-rises surrounded by open land, and linked together by high-speed public transport. That was a wonderful idea then, given cheap and abundant oil, water, and agricultural land; stable climate and sea-levels; a small but growing population; and rising tourism in an America-dominated world.

Dense high rise growth is a problematic idea now, not only in Kakaako, but also anywhere in the Islands. For several years, I have been using the metaphor of “The Unholy Trinity” to describe some of the challenges facing all of the world, but especially potent for us here in Hawaii. I use the “Unholy Trinity” phrase because, like the doctrine of the Holy Trinity of Christianity that declares that God is of one substance but of three persons, so also, energy, economics, and the environment are three challenges, often considered (when they are considered at all) as separate issues. But, like the Holy Trinity, the three are one at base. They must be considered together. The solutions to one cannot be found in the other two, as many experts now seem to assume.

The reason the world has experienced over two hundred years of extraordinary economic growth, with expanding populations and rising standards of health and welfare, is in large part because we have enjoyed two hundred years of exceptionally benign and stable global climate, as well as cheap and abundant energy—especially oil—enabling ample water, fertilizers, and machines that have produced prodigious surpluses of food and material goods at very low prices.

There are very good reasons to believe that these fortuitous processes are coming to an end while challenges many of us have never experienced in our lifetimes or which we have assumed would never touch us again are looming. In the case of the planned high rises, why are so many, so very tall and densely packed, needed? Who is going to live in them? Is a sudden rapid rise in population expected—or desired? What will weather be in Hawaii? What will other environmental conditions be? What future needs are they addressing? How can we be sure that there will be sufficient cheap energy to fuel their operation? What will be their economic base? In short, what kind of alternative futures forecasting has been done that ended up justifying their being built? They seem to be planned with the past, and not the futures, in mind. While they may be great for certain business and labor sectors now, they may well stand shortly after they are built as empty towering monuments to our irresponsibility towards future generations.

No one can predict what THE future will be. Perhaps concerns about the Unholy Trinity will turn out not to have been justified at all. Or we might very well underestimate the impact the Unholy Trinity will have on our futures. Without serious futures forecasting, we are all engaged in a local version of a game of Russian Roulette played out in a global economic/energy/environmental casino.

If high rise development goes ahead as anticipated, I have one request: that the people who plan, build, and profit from it be required to live on the very top stories of the tallest

buildings they erect. If the oil runs out, the elevators stop running, and water stops flowing, they can experience toney conditioning from walking up and down the stairs to their towering quarters. Or if energy, elevators, and water flows cheaply and abundantly, they can toast their good fortune while watching the sunset at the very top of their world.

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