

On Just Saying NO! to West Oahu

Jim Dator
September 30, 2001

After reflecting on what Chancellor Deane Neubauer said to the Manoa Faculty Senate on Wednesday, September 26, 2001, I sent him the following email the next morning:

Date: Thu, 27 Sep 2001 09:14:51 -1000 (HST)
From: Jim Dator <dator@hawaii.edu>
To: Deane Neubauer <deane@hawaii.edu>
Subject: CIP

Deane, I just want to go on record with you that I am totally opposed to the position you and Dobelle are taking regarding building a new campus in Ewa and a new medical school.

However, because I respect you so much, and know how very difficult your present job is, I will be silent about this.

I have thought about it for a very long time and come reluctantly to that conclusion.

But I remain outraged that the Governor did not (to my knowledge) invite a single UH faculty member to discuss the future of the State with him. He only invited people who have an immediate and greedy interest in getting their noses as deep as possible in the public trough--only to insist on cutting taxes and badmouthing government once good times return.

Remember when Burns and Ariyoshi, and even Waihee, would call on us for advice?

This Governor hates our guts and shows his contempt by utterly ignoring us in this crisis.

And how do we respond?

By rolling on our backs and pretending we enjoy being fucked.

I do not see how this posture will gain the respect of either the Governor or the Legislature, or any viable political candidates.

I think building West Oahu (and probably the Med school) is wrong in every way. It certainly will be an enormous burden on future generations. And I think it is wrong for us not to say so.

But, as I say, I will respect your judgement, and be silent. I do not envy your position.

I just wanted you to know by true feelings here.

Jim

As of this date, I have not received a reply from Chancellor Neubauer.

Knowing of my general concerns, but not the reasoning behind them, several people have suggested I at least write them down, for the record, even if I do not distribute them more widely.

Here are my concerns, very succinctly put:

Point One:

President Evan Dobelle has offered two major excuses for the construction of a full-scale campus on west Oahu. One is in order to make UHM the "Berkeley of the Pacific". There are, he has said frequently, too many students at Manoa who don't belong here. Their GPAs and SATs are too low for a "Berkeley"-type campus. We need to construct a "Cal State"-type campus at west Oahu for them to attend.

The second reason is because the population growth on Oahu is moving in the direction of Waianae, and so we need to build a new campus there to serve the new center of population density.

Concerning Dobelle's first reason, I am sure all UHM faculty would like to share Dobelle's dream of UHM as the Berkeley of the Pacific. We have dreamed that dream now for many long years. It is not an impossible dream, but it is a difficult dream to achieve, for several reasons:

1. Our population base is too small and our economy too fragile for a California-style system of higher education. I will return to that below.

2. Even though Dobelle has said that we need to find ways to make the brightest and best of our high school graduates to come to UHM, it is not an unwise decision for any college-bound person who has lived all of her life in the Islands to go away for college. There are real limits in our ability to attract a sizeable number of the best local high school graduates. We can and should try to attract more, but coming to Manoa for most local kids will never be like going to Berkeley is for most California kids.

3. Dobelle says he wants to recruit the brightest and best of foreign and mainland students to come to a Berkeley-type UHM. That also is a worthwhile goal. However, in the past we have had policies that have strictly limited the number of non-Hawaiian students who could register at UH. There were felt to be good reasons for this. There is now nothing wrong with trying to attract high-quality and high-paying mainland and foreign students to offset the loss of high quality local students.

But none of Dobelle's stated reasons justify creating a state college system here in imitation of California and other big states. We surely can find innovative ways to create an honors college within the present UHM campus while also allowing UHM to function as a state college in other respects. It is a much better use of our limited financial, physical, and intellectual resources.

There can be absolutely no doubt that building a major campus on West Oahu will drain resources from Manoa and not allow it to be a good, much less enable it to become a great, university. It is either ignorance or hypocrisy to argue otherwise. The examples of the California, Wisconsin, Michigan, North Carolina, or Florida systems of higher education that Dobelle and others articulate for Hawaii are completely inappropriate. We have neither the population nor the economic basis to support such a comparison. Better examples are Idaho, Montana, and the two Dakotas.

But we actually are utterly unique among American states in that we are an island community thousands of miles away from any other land mass. Even Idaho, Montana and the two Dakotas have sizeable population and economic bases near by. We do not.

We are also exceptional in having 80% of our population on one small island. Even though there is higher growth rate on the other islands, they are still very small compared to Oahu and they will be small for the foreseeable future.

It has always been a point of pride that Hawaii wants to have institutions of higher education that rank with California, North Carolina, Wisconsin and Michigan, and not with Montana, Idaho and the Dakotas. That is a dream I share. It is what brought me to Hawaii, and what keeps me here. But we need to be very careful in how we define and try to achieve that dream.

The history of higher education in the State shows clearly three things: 1) that our dreams have always exceeded our grasp; 2) that we are all too willing to deplete the resources of the colleges of arts and sciences at Manoa in order to fund professional and vocational schools and programs which may or may not be as crucial to Hawaii as is basic and/or excellent liberal education; and 3) that we are very willing to erect large and ugly buildings but then are totally unwilling or unable thereafter to equip and maintain them.

Excellence in higher education for Hawaii can not mean the same thing it means in California. We need to be very careful and precise in finding an appropriate measure for Hawaii.

Dobelle's second reason for building a state college in west Oahu is unconvincing as well. There is no pedagogical need for it.

Distances are not so great in Honolulu, nor travel conditions so poor, that it makes sense to build a four-year college on the Ewa Plain just because population growth is moving in that direction. If this were

Montana (or Alaska) where distances are vast and population thinly spread in clumps across the state, then it might make sense to sprinkle campuses across the land. On Oahu, it does not.

For any who cannot travel to the present (and slightly expanded) West Oahu campus, or Manoa, we can very well serve the local community by using existing community facilities for face-to-face classes and for tutoring courses otherwise delivered online, or via an upgraded HITs.

Indeed this is the most telling argument against west Oahu of all. Given improvements in communication technologies, it makes less and less sense to spend vast sums erecting permanent buildings on large campuses anywhere. It makes more and more sense to spend the same amount of money on communications infrastructure, hardware, software, maintenance, and faculty training and support.

If UH wants to contribute to the Governor's economic emergency relief package, then spend the money on communications, and not on buildings.

Point Two.

There are even more urgent reasons for taking this route. After the events of September 11, we cannot easily assume a business-as-usual scenario in anything. While it is just and reasonable that the Governor and the local community seek to find ways to minimize economic hardship caused by the aftermath of 911, it is irresponsible of the University simply to allow special interests to dust off old plans and put them forward as our contribution without allowing a single person from the University (other than a newbie president) to participate in the decision making process.

Once upon a time, Hawaii's governors and legislators used the University of Hawaii as a major resource in times of crisis or new visions. I certainly recall being consulted and having my opinions considered many times by Governors Burns and Ariyoshi and by other governmental leaders of the day. That is by no means unique: many UH faculty were regularly called upon to be the kinds of resources that only they can be-- people with a professional, scholarly, and often global perspective on current and local issues, and without any expectation of being directly financially rewarded by the decisions made. The people who participated in the Governor's economic emergency meetings all have very high stakes in making a lot of money immediately by having their pet projects funded by the public. Often these are the very same people who have been arguing in good times that government should get off their backs, but are quite happy to have the public bail them out when the economy turns down.

If they want our cooperation, then they should allow us to participate and consider our ideas. But if we are entirely excluded from the conversation, why should we be complicit in their self-serving decisions?

Point Three

Indeed this entire episode is merely shibai. This is just a local example of what is happening nationally. Every politician or interest group is (quite understandably) using the current crisis to push through their agenda. Ashcroft and company are using it vastly to increase military spending and the overall militarization of our society along with the suppression of dissent and of civil liberties generally. Cayetano and his cronies are using it to see that as many of their fingers can pilfer from the public till as possible.

That is not exactly correct. The funding for West Oahu and the Med School will not come from current income, of which there is none, but from future generations by the issuance of bonds. It is completely irresponsible for the University community to saddle future generations with expenses, and to so severely limit their options, just so some people in the present can prosper.

The argument has been made that UH needs to support the Governor's proposals without objection in order that the Governor and the Legislature will respect us and grant us our wishes in the future; that if we object, they will say that is just one more example of the fact the we are not team players.

I do not know of any instance where people who are not only excluded from consultations but also who abandon their principles and kowtow to power are respected as a consequence. The laughter in the halls of power will be about what great suckers we are--what easy and frightened pushovers--and not what great team players we are. You can be sure of that.