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Pine Trees: Residents turn out in force at meeting

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No matter what may be contained in a 1996 Shoreline Management Plan or a 2006 Preservation Plan for the Natural Energy Laboratory of Hawaii Authority and Kohanaiki areas, residents called for the jeep trail leading to Kohanaiki to be opened immediately.

"(Baird) needs to put his right hand on his left ear and his left hand on his right ear and pull his head out of his (expletive)," said Soli Niheu, of Waimea, referring to NELHA's Chief Executive Officer Ron Baird. "You've got 30 days to open up the gate and give us back what is rightfully ours. Open the gate or get the hell out of our way because we'll be coming down."

More than 400 people attend-

ed the informational meeting regarding safety and access to the popular Pine Trees surf spot and Kohanaiki area Friday evening at the Kealakehe High School cafeteria that was attended by representatives from the state's departments of Transportation and Business, Economic Development and Tourism, as well as state Sen. Josh Green D-North Kona, Honokohau, Kailua-Kona and

Keauhou, state Rep. Cindy Evans, D-North Kona, South Kohala, and state Rep. Denny Coffman, D-North Kona, Honokohau, Kailua-Kona and Keauhou.

At the meeting, Green encouraged attendees to call or write Baird or his superior, DBEDT Director Ted Liu, noting that NELHA's actions are "unconscionable" and

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representatives will push for the agency to open the four-by-four trail gates.

"Our community is here to protect our rights to access the ocean and safeguard our activities at Kohanaiki," said former Hawaii County Councilman Angel Pilago, representing the Kohanaiki Ohana. "Many of these people here are students, children, mothers, fathers and grandparents who have practiced their cultural rights before there was ever a NELHA or a gate. With NELHA being this arrogant to close the gate makes a mockery of the state and the people of Hawaii."

He added after finding out there was not a NELHA representative present, "it's unfortunate they are too chicken to come out of their exclusive place and face the people."

For Violet Leihulu Mamac, all shoreline areas, not just Kohanaiki, need to be accessible to Hawaii residents 24 hours a day, seven days a week.

"It is not right for anyone to lock a gate to beaches we need access 24/7 because of our culture, our tradition, our beliefs and our customs whether they be religious or spiritual in nature," she said, noting her ancestors lived in the area. "The people of Hawaii need to be respected and have access to a place where they can make spiritual and religious connections."

Kohanaiki Ohana's Rebecca Shute noted the

reason for the closures has changed over time. First, it was claimed NELHA was closing its main entrance early and on weekends because of economic trouble. Later, NELHA representatives said the closure of the four-wheel-drive was to protect significant archaeological areas. Finally the closure of the jeep trail was explained by the 1996 Shoreline Management Plan and 2006 Preservation Plan that both indicated NELHA planned to close the gate once another access had been made available to the public.

Shute also noted that she had collected a petition signed by 1,450 residents over seven days in support of having the gate reopened.

Another attendee testified at the meeting that she had collected, in less than 30 hours, the signatures of an additional 1,000 people.

"That's how many people want this gate open ASAP," exclaimed Shannon Rudolph to a standing ovation.

In the end, many testified that Hawaii's shorelines have been encroached upon enough and what shoreline access is left needs to be protected.

"All beaches in Hawaii belong to the public and too many have been limited and we have to fight to protect what is left," said Karen Eoff. "The closure is not necessary. We can find solutions. Public shoreline access must be protected and the gate must be opened — the people of this region are not willing to sit by and watch NELHA privatize the Kohanaiki shoreline."