

# views & voices

## Plan now on units for disabled, aged

There's no disputing that Hawaii's fast-growing senior population as well as people with disabilities make up a significant portion of the state's low-income residents seeking affordable housing. That's why mandating basic accessibility-related features for new or renovated homes tagged by state government as "affordable" is clearly a sensible course of action.

Bills crafted by the University of Hawaii Center on Disability Studies aim to require that every new home produced through the Hawaii Public Housing Authority and the Hawaii Housing Finance and Development Corp. include six basic features that ease everyday access for anyone with mobility challenges. The low-cost, must-do list is not daunting.

Even so, House Bill 1919 has already been essentially gutted by the House Consumer Protection Committee, which last month amended the bill so that instead of requiring the features, it allows them as options in the state building code for new homes built through the two agencies. The Senate version, SB 2594, passed two committees without a similar amendment; should it advance to the House, lawmakers must seize the opportunity to correct their misstep on HB 1919.

Diluting this fair-minded mandate to a wishy-washy option does little, if anything, to address emerging social inclusion issues.

Surely, our aging baby boomers — the oldest among them are now in their early 70s — along with younger people living with disability-related challenges, would be better equipped to hold onto their independence in housing fitted with: one no-step entrance; interior doorways at least 32 inches wide; adequate space to use a wheelchair in food preparation areas; bathroom walls that can support grab bars; half bath or preferably full bath on the main floor; and light switches and electrical outlets within comfortable reach.

Hawaii has the most people over age 65 per capita in the nation. The latest U.S. Census Bureau data finds that 17 percent of the state's 1.4 million

residents are at least 65 — a bump up by almost 3 percent since 2010. And according to a UH study released last year, more than 9 percent of older women in the islands live below the poverty line. A mandate would help people in this so-called "silver tsunami" bracket.

What's more, UH researchers persuasively point out that a mandate would be a prudent move toward putting in place recommendations in a 2016 Center on Disability Studies report that addresses a federal requirement to report impediments to fair-housing choices. The top impediment: a paltry supply of housing — for either rent or purchase — that is both affordable and accessible to the disabled.

Much of the existing inventory is limited to older options, such as low-rise apartment buildings that lack elevators and single-family homes raised off the ground. However, the overall scarcity of affordable housing statewide prompted the Legislature, two years ago, to pass Act 127, which set a goal of developing at least 22,500 affordable rental units by 2026. The proposed half-dozen accessibility features should be folded into that goal, including in plans for developments near rail stations and in master-planned communities, such as Ho'opili and Koa Ridge.

The UH Center on Disability Studies notes that over the lifetime of new homes, it is estimated that more than two-thirds will be inhabited by at least one person with mobility challenges. In addition, even the fully mobile can appreciate so-called "visitable home" features as a means to improve accessibility and prevent accidents.

Limiting the measure to discretionary will likely result in an eventual clamor to retrofit properties, which would surely be more expensive. It can cost \$3,000 to \$10,000 to install a wheelchair ramp, for example. To put in place effective and forward-thinking policy, lawmakers must require visitable features in all new and renovated affordable housing.