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**Editorial | Our View**

# Amendments call for careful thought

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Among the 20 Honolulu City Charter amendments voters will consider in the upcoming election, one of them — Amendment 8 — would make significant changes in how the city manages and develops its properties. The amendment would create a new Department of Land Management that would consolidate certain land-management responsibilities now dispersed among various departments under a single agency, with a director appointed by the mayor.

Proponents, including the Caldwell administration, say the new department would be more efficient, and bring a higher level of professionalism to land management. For example, with many functions under one roof, the department could be more nimble in advancing complex transactions like public-private partnerships to develop affordable housing projects around rail transit stations.

But opponents fear unintended consequences: that a one-stop shop would make it easier for the city to ram through developer-friendly projects with less public oversight, by eliminating some of the checks and balances commonly used to challenge projects.

Creating this new department would be more complicated than it sounds. According to a group investigating an early version of this proposal for the city's Charter Review Commission, a fully functioning department could take about three years to establish. It could involve reorganizing such functions as leasing and commercial space management, real estate appraisals, transit-oriented development and other land management functions now handled by other departments.

The cost? Hard to say, but it's likely to be more. The final version that voters will consider has addressed some of the concerns of skeptics: The city's park lands would not be included, and the department would be required to hold a public hearing and report on how its actions advance the public interest, including environmental protections.

Nonetheless, as a general principle, creating new departments under the City Charter should be done with utmost care — especially when they would have far-reaching implications, as this one would. The review group suggested that “if the elected officials and public are not ready for this step,” then a study should be conducted and the community at large “engage in a broad and thoughtful discussion of how the city should meet its vision for the future.” At this stage, that seems like reasonable advice. Vote no.

**Amendment No. 5.** This would ease the income restrictions of the city's Affordable Housing Fund to make it align with other government funds. Right now, the fund can be used to develop rental housing for people earning less than 50 percent of the median household income, and the housing must remain affordable in perpetuity. The amendment would raise the income threshold to 60 percent and reduce the affordability timeline to 60 years.

While the fund's purposes are commendable — to help the poorest of the working class — the restrictions prevent the fund from participating in housing projects with less strict rules. Partnership among all levels of government, and the private sector as well, is essential to tackling the pervasive and complex problem of homelessness. This amendment will free up funds to do so. Vote yes.

**No. 10.** This technically worded amendment is intended to clear up questions about the respective authorities of the mayor and City Council to create special funds and amend the annual executive budget. Right now it's not clear if these powers are held exclusively by the mayor or are shared with the Council. The amendment would allow both the mayor and the Council to create special funds and amend the budget, subject to normal budget approval processes. It would also clarify that the powers of the mayor and Council are subject only to exceptions specifically provided in the Charter. Vote yes.

**No. 20.** This amendment contains an important provision that requires all city departments to make their books and records open to public inspection. Right now, the Honolulu Police Department and the Prosecuting Attorney's office are exempted. That should change. The amendment also contains housekeeping provisions that establish timelines regarding amendments and updates to the Charter, as well as requiring legal review of Board of Water Supply and rail transit contracts, and adherence to the state procurement code. Vote yes.

**No. 1.** This would give the Police Commission greater authority to suspend or dismiss the police chief, additional powers to investigate complaints concerning officer misconduct, and require the chief to submit a written explanation for his/her disagreement with the commission. This expansion of the commission's powers — assuming it exercises them as needed — is necessary to maintain public confidence in HPD and the chief, both of which have come under fire. Vote yes.

A roundup of all the amendments and our recommendations:

**No. 1** Police commission: Yes.

**No. 2** Ethics Commission: Yes.

**No. 3** City Prosecutor: Yes.

**No. 4** Public transportation: Yes.

**No. 5** Affordable Housing Fund: Yes.

**No. 6** Long-term city planning: Yes.

**No. 7** Create an office of climate change: No.

**No. 8** Create a department of land management: No.

**No. 9** Honolulu Zoo: Yes.

**No. 10** Budget authority: Yes.

**No. 11** Clean Water Natural Lands Fund: Yes.

**No. 12** Boards, commissions: Yes.

**No. 13** Grants in aid: Yes.

**No. 14** Special elections: Yes

**No. 15** Term limits: No

**No. 16** Infrastructure design: Yes.

**No. 17** Document signing: Yes.

**No. 18** Fire Commission: Yes.

**No. 19** Reapportionment Commission: No.

**No. 20** Public records: Yes.