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Study considers Kahului Harbor alternatives

By HARRY EAGAR, Staff Writer

KAHULUI – The Harbors Division has sketched out its alternatives to build a Kahului Harbor capable of providing for a Maui population with an estimated 200,000 residents by 2030.

Two very different possible harbors are described in the preparation notice for an environmental impact statement, published Thursday in the bulletin of the Office of Environmental Quality Control.

One version moves cruise and interisland ferry piers to the almost-unused west breakwater. The other develops the west breakwater for cargo but keeps the Hawaii Superferry at Pier 2 and cruise ships at Pier 1. Both versions call for extensions of both breakwaters and dredging to widen the turning basin and improve the entrance. The first alternative – moving passengers to the west breakwater – also calls for filling in a triangle of land between the west tip of Pier 2 and the shoreline at Puunene Avenue. That would impact canoe clubs, although both versions probably have some effect on the use of the noncommercial parts of the harbor for recreation. Maui's one port brings in 98 percent of what we eat and wear, sell to tourists, put in our fuel tanks and use to build homes and businesses.

As a legal requirement, an EIS needs to include the "do nothing" alternative, but the harbor is already bursting at its seams. Forecasts call for a de facto (including tourists) population of 262,000 in 2030. Already 400,000 head of tourist come in through the harbor, a number that can only grow as more ships enter the Hawaii trade. Ever since the days of American Hawaii Cruises, the state has wished to get passengers away from Pier 1, because of the potential for accidents as they walk through an industrial yard.

The 20-acre west breakwater beckons, but the problem is wave surges in the harbor, in some circumstances, would pound a ship moored there against its pier. Studies were undertaken in the early 1990s by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers at its hydraulic research center in Vicksburg, Miss., to determine whether the surge could be controlled. Consultants at Belt Collins apparently think that extending both breakwaters will work. The east breakwater would be lengthened straight north, out to sea. The west breakwater would curl back into the harbor, forming a dock with an opening that would point at Kahului Beach Road.

Maui has no natural all-weather harbors. The Kahului Harbor is an artificial creation, and most of the dry land around it derives from fill.

The state Harbors Division updates its harbor master plan every few years. The current plan looked out to 2025, but the rapidly increasing volumes of freight, fuel and passengers shortened the time until the next update to just five years further out.

The 2025 plan called for a number of changes. Some have been done, like a new waterline and restrooms on Pier 1. Others, like a small fourth pier springing from the eastern edge of Pier 3 have not been started. (The rebuilding of the small boat ramp on the west breakwater was a project by the Division of Boating and Ocean Recreation. That corner of the harbor is not included in either the 2025 or 2030 master plans.) Cargo traffic through the harbor is approaching 4 million tons per year, and the berths are occupied about 59 percent of the time, day and night. That is higher than at most ports. Since all berths serve several clients, there is often a conflict.

For example, both cruise ships and the vessel that takes sugar off Maui use Pier 1B. The sugar freighter takes two days to load, several times a year, but cruise ships use that berth six days a week. It often happens that a ship partially loaded or unloaded has to move to make way for a higher priority vessel. Such movements can cost tens of thousands of dollars, and the heavy use of the harbor drives up operational costs significantly.

The first alternative expansion would: Remove cruise and ferry passengers to a new 1,200-foot Pier 5 on the west breakwater, with two 500-foot piers, and ground facilities such as terminals. Widen the turning basin by 800 feet and extend both breakwaters. The turning basin is now 2,050 feet by 2,400 feet. Its shortest dimension is not much more than twice as long as the longest ships calling at the harbor. Lengthen Pier 1 from 1,760 to 2,400 feet to serve vessels moving vehicles, containers, sugar, molasses, sand and gravel, pineapple, tin plate, scrap metal, coal, petroleum and other cargo. Lengthen Pier 2 from 870 to 1,200 feet and enlarge its backup area by 4 acres by filling in the area in front of the canoe hales. Pier 2 would then, as now, serve interisland barges carrying containers, fuel, vehicles and bulk cargo.

In today's congested harbor, Young Brothers says it needs to increase volumes but cannot increase its total port calls, already almost daily at Pier 2. To get more containers through per sailing, it is buying larger barges (and tugs). Ironically, however, at Kahului this will cost it one berth. Today, two small barges can fit simultaneously at Piers 2 and 3. The same space will not serve two of the larger barges at once.

Proceed with the 2025 plan for a Pier 4, which would provide more berthing for dry cargoes (like Portland cement) and also for alternative fuels, such as biofuels. (**BlueEarth**, which announced plans to build a biodiesel refinery, plans to bring palm oil into Pier 1, where it would recommission a disused Maui Electric Co. pipeline. Most liquid fuel comes to Pier 3.

The second alternative would include some of the changes in the first, such as widening the turning basin and extending both breakwaters. Differences include: Leaving Pier 1 at 1,760 feet but using it only for cargo. Lengthening Pier 2 to 1,200 feet, as in the first alternative, but constructing a terminal and a cruise ship berth. The interisland ferry would be accommodated at the pier end. Building Pier 5 at the west breakwater to accommodate the interisland barges now using Pier 2.

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