

Talking Story with Councilmember Gladys C. Baisa

By Tom Blackburn-Rodriguez

Gladys Baisa is always on the move. Her day will often start with meetings at 7:00 AM over coffee and end later that evening after a council meeting, a public hearing, or a community event.

In her first term as a councilmember (Pukalani-Kula-Ulupalakua) residency area, after a successful 37-year career at Maui Economic Opportunity (MEO), she joins two other new members on the county council –Mike Victorino and Bill Medeiros—who are also being watched by the voters to see how they will evolve as elected officials in the midst of controversies over land use, water, development, growth, transportation, alternative energy, and vacation rentals, to name just a few of the issues they face.

Baisa is a local girl. She was born in Paia at the Old Paia Hospital that has since been torn down and is now a sugar cane field. A graduate of the old Maui High School, she is the daughter of Tommy Coelho and Virginia Freitas Coelho. Her father, like many of the men in his time, worked for the mill and his labor helped make sugar king on Maui.

We wanted to learn more about this new council member and what she had learned since assuming office. We sat down with Councilmember Baisa following a meeting of her supporters in Makawao. After she had made sure everyone had enough to eat, we began the interview.

Gladys, you've helped a lot of people during the many years you spent at MEO. But, I want to focus on what you are doing now as a relatively

new councilmember still in your first term. What committees do you serve on and chair?

I serve on the Budget and Finance Committee, the Land Use Committee, the Policy Committee and the Water Resources Committee, and I chair the Planning Committee.

You're in public office for the first time. Anything different from what you expected?

I always felt that I pretty much understood what needed to be done because I spent so much time working with government because MEO is largely grant funded and most of the money comes from federal, state and county money.

As an Executive Director I spent many years testifying at county meetings with the council members, attending community meetings, and so I felt that I was comfortable in that milieu. I knew the players.

And now?

I'll be candid and tell you that for the first couple of months I really felt I was in the wrong place and I really wanted to leave. It was such a large change from being in a nonprofit environment and not having much orientation on the job, I didn't feel comfortable. I was in a different kind of office.

How was council service different from your earlier experiences?



In her first year as Chair of the Maui County Council Planning Committee, Baisa has begun to tackle the tough issues that come before her committee including Transient Vacation Rentals, moratorium legislation, and the new Maui County General Plan.

In a nonprofit agency you're always working for a mission, a program mission. You're working with volunteers, and a board, everybody is marching in one direction. But, when you're on the council that is not the case. You're working with eight other people each one having their own unique agenda, or their own personality, or their own feelings about stuff, and there is so much discussion, controversy, different viewpoints, that it takes a lot more to come to any kind of consensus.

The first big issue that you waded into was over the pay level for council members. Any regrets over taking that on?

Absolutely not. I still feel that council members should be paid a fair salary. A salary that will encourage people who need the money to pay their bills so they can afford to run. I know that people say it's public service. That it's voluntary. But, they do not understand the contribution and the sacrifices that are made. You give up all of your personal time. There is very little of that unless you get selfish and say, "Today, I'm going to take time off. It's my husband's birthday."

That's something new for you. That loss of privacy. How do you handle that?

You never have privacy when you're in the public because people see you, they want to discuss something with you, they want to talk to you, and realizing that that's your job—you just do it.

It isn't like you go to an office and you work 9-5 and then you go home. It definitely is not like that.

How many hours do you put in your job in an average week?

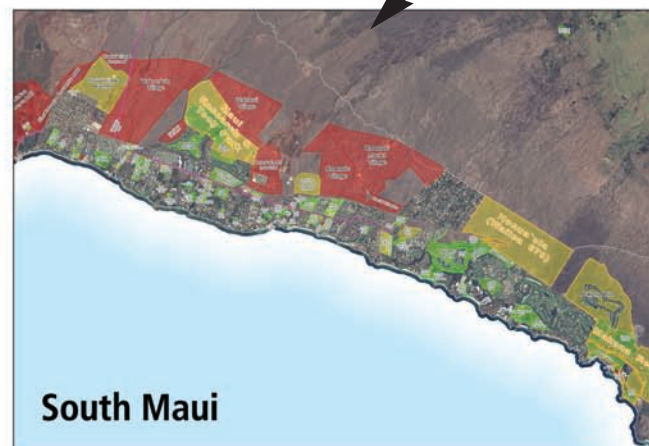
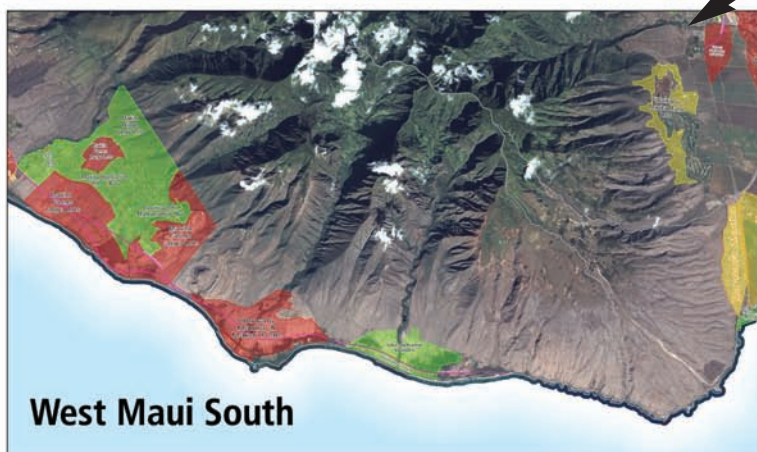
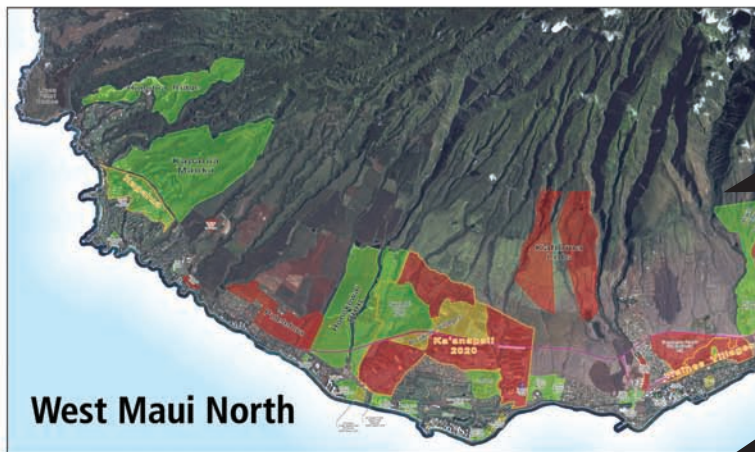
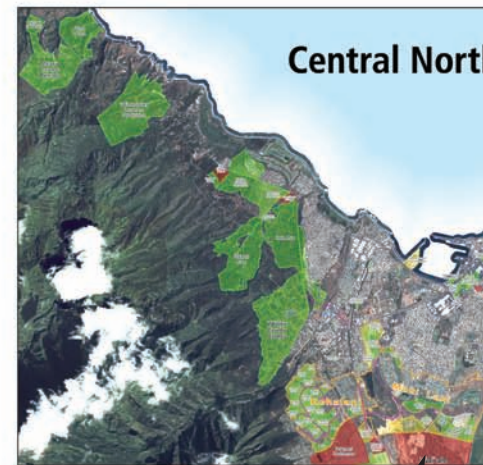
I would say a minimum of 80.

How do you answer people who say you're putting in 80 hours a week because you're wasting a lot of time. Council meetings go on and on and if you were more efficient you wouldn't be putting in 80 hours a week?

The thing is you have no control over your colleagues. When you're sitting in a meeting the only person you have control over is yourself. I try very hard to speak when I have something to contribute, to try to find out as much as I can about an issue before the meeting. I meet with people. Anybody who requests to meet with me, if I can possibly fit them in my schedule, I meet with them.

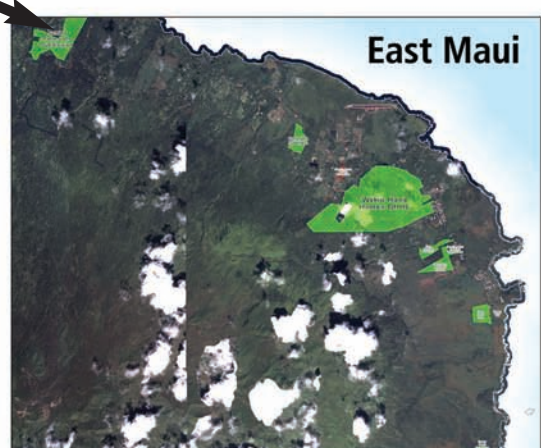
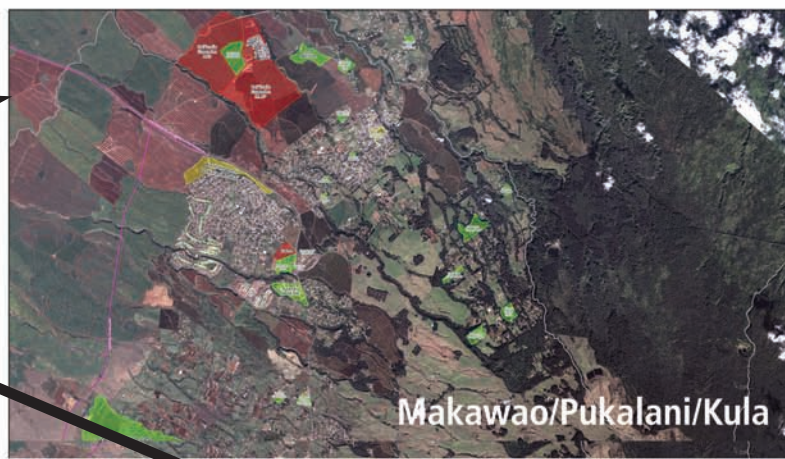
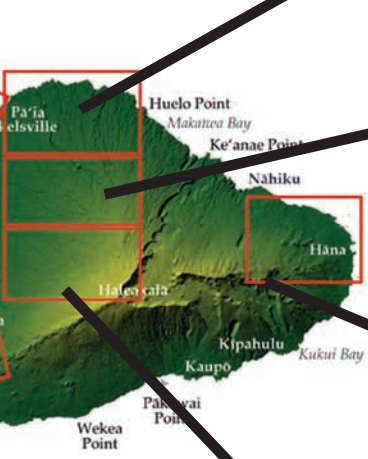
Development

Included are areas in Green (planned/committed),



Plans on Maui

(Green (existing), Red (proposed), and Yellow (planned/designated)).



I like to talk with people on both sides of an issue so I'm well informed about what the situation is. And I really try to get that down before the meeting.

Whereas other people, many of them, like to ask all of their questions on the floor and so that takes a lot of time, and as a councilmember sitting next to them you have no control over that so you just have to go with it.

We have a lot of respect for each other and for our chair of whatever committee we are in, and we also have respect for our chair of the council and we look to him for guidance and direction. It's interesting because you're not doing things by yourself; you're working with eight other people.

As chair of the Planning Committee a major issue that came before you were Transient Vacation Rentals, or TVRs. Can you tell me a little bit about that?

When I became chair of the Planning Committee, one of the first things I did was sit down with the people that are involved in getting meetings together for the Planning Committee. That means I have meetings on a regular basis with the Planning Director, the Deputy Planning Director, with my planning committee staff person, and with my co-chair Jo Anne Johnson.

At my first agenda planning meeting I sat around the table, a brand new council member, with senior, very seasoned people there and myself and Jeff Hunt. I said to the group, "I'd like to take up some of the issues that have been around for a while and see if we can move them out. Can you tell some of the most important ones that are here?"

The first one that came out was Transient Vacation Rentals. I said, "OK, let's deal with that, so we put it on the agenda. Talk about fools rush in where angels fear to tread, the rest is history. But, I'm very happy



I would say that on an average week I put in a minimum of 80 hours," said Baisa.

that I didn't know what to expect and that I was not afraid to go there because I think we're going to find a solution and the only way to find a solution is to get it on the table, hash it out, and compromise and do something."

What did your committee do?

What happened was there was a Bill in the committee that had been crafted by the previous Council. It had gone to the Planning Commissions for them to review. When it came back from the Planning Commissions—which is when I got it— they did not want to approve it. They didn't like it and they were very unhappy with it.

So, after we had several meetings and we had people come and testify, and our committee spent a lot of time and energy looking at it, we decided that it wouldn't work and we needed a new bill.

As of this interview, the draft bill is being reviewed by all three planning commissions and as soon as that work is complete and we have their review and recommendations then it will be brought back to my committee and my commitment to everyone concerned—because there is so much concern about it—is that I will hear the bill as soon as possible after it comes back.

What do you hope for now? There are increasing stories about people perhaps losing their homes or land if they don't have the TVR income. How do you hope this is resolved?

I am hoping that a lot of people are not hurt in the process. I really hope so. I hope we can find a way win-win for everybody. I think some people will be hurt, unfortunately. And it's because of misunderstandings or they didn't quite understand there was going to be a day of reckoning at some point, but I hope that we can find a way to make some of the establishments that are good and are right, are in the right place, and that we don't have too many, we have to set some numbers, I don't know what those numbers are, I have no idea at this point.

I'm hoping that we can put them in areas where people will not be impacted and be upset about it. I'm hoping that people will understand, and personally I'm willing to say this, I think that we need alternative visitor accommodations. I think this is a fact of life. I have spoken to hundreds of people, I've received e-mails from hundreds of people, and I know this myself, being a traveler, that people like alternative accommodations and I think we have to be real and things need to change with the market and the visitor make-up.

Any conditions you might favor for TVRs?

I tend to feel that the establishment where the owner, or a

responsible employee, is present 24-hours a day is really a better way to go because it should minimize a lot of the complaints. You know it's very frustrating if there is noise going on or a car parked where it shouldn't be and you're the neighbor and you go out and you look around and there is no one for you for to talk to.

We just approved a Bed & Breakfast the other day and one of the conditions was that they would have quiet time from ten at night until eight in the morning. The other thing is that they would put a sign up and post an emergency number so that if there was trouble it could be called. And that none of the cars could be parked on the street where they block the parking and cause an unsafe situation for people that live in the area.

Let's change topics. The County is preparing a new General Plan that will shape where we live and how we live in the future. What's your take on the General Plan? Are you happy with it? Anything you're learning there?

(Ed. Note: The GPAC is the Maui General Plan Advisory Committee, comprised of 25 volunteers appointed by the Mayor and the Council to make recommendations to the Planning Director about what should be contained in the Maui Island General Plan. There is a separate GPAC for Moloka'i and Lana'i. The Planning Director takes the recommendations from all three GPACs and presents his recommendations to the various island planning commissions. The planning commissions then report their recommendations to the Council for final decision.)

I've had the opportunity to attend many meetings of the GPAC. I made it a priority. I will continue to be involved as it emerges. The reason I wanted to do that was because I felt it was important to be familiar with the documents and the process and to how they're getting to where they're going so it wouldn't be a surprise when it got to council.

It's going to be a big job for us. Trying to get all that together, and again come to consensus and recommendations that we all can live with. I see it now in the Maui Planning Commission as they're reviewing the work of the GPAC members. When we get it, it's not going to be any easier. We're going to have a bunch of documents and we're going to have to go through them line-by-line and word-for-word and come to, again, consensus.

This General Plan is going to go to 2050. That is a long time. I am hoping that it will have some very strong parameters in it, like good urban boundaries, and some real teeth in it. Because, it will make everyone's work a lot easier.



Events like this one in Makawao that also helped raise funds on behalf of 19-year old Samantha Souza of Makawao (White hat), vying to compete as Hawaii's representative in the Miss Rodeo America Pageant are part of Gladys Baisa's day. Here she is (left) with Steve Goodfellow and Souza's mother Jennifer Souza

Why easier?

Just think how simple it could be if you could pull out the General Plan when people go to the Planning Commission or when they come to the Council and say, "I'm sorry, that's not a permitted use in your area. The General Plan said no." And it's over.

Some have expressed the view that the General Plan could turn into a no growth document. Do you see any reason for that concern?

I don't see that. I think that the General Plan is talking about growth in the right places. Growth where infrastructure is doable. And growth at a rate that isn't going to cause what we're dealing with right now.

Do you see any themes emerging from the community about growth?

I think that growth is an issue. It's been an issue for a very long time. In fact, I would say, it is probably the issue. It tends to get sidetracked with issues like water and traffic, where it is and so on. But, growth is the issue.

How much, where, when and how are we going to live with it? Are we going to have the water? Are we going to have enough roads to deal with it, or enough parks? But, I think we tend to in our discussions to focus on pieces of growth. The Council will spend weeks and weeks and weeks talking about water for a project. The issue is not the water. The issue is the growth. But, we tend to get sidetracked.

The 800-pound Gorilla in the room is development, and

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