

HOTELPAC – 2020 Candidate Questionnaire (County)

Keith Amemiya, Mayoral Candidate for the City and County of Honolulu

1) The future of tourism in Hawai'i

Despite tourism's status as one of our state's top economic drivers, the COVID-19 pandemic has led some to call for our economy to diversify away from tourism. HLTA's longstanding position has been that our economy should look to diversify within tourism, i.e., develop and expand industries that complement tourism. Would you support this policy given the challenge of identifying industries that could immediately replace the number of jobs and revenue tourism generates for our state's economy? If not, what are your proposals for diversification?

I support safe tourism, investing in industries that complement tourism, and continuing to grow areas of our economy to provide new and resilient jobs. In my Recovery Plan, I outlined ways that we can support a healthier version of tourism, including (1) ensuring that sufficient contact tracing, testing, and safety protocols exist to keep both our visitors and hospitality workers safe, and (2) attracting higher end visitors that will spend more per person so that we maintain consistent revenue from fewer people.

I also support diversifying our economy to create more resilient jobs, especially in the areas of green energy, agriculture, and aquaculture. Local agriculture has proven a selling point for our hospitality industry and visitors that want to experience a true sense of place during their visit. With tourism so negatively affected by the recent pandemic, however, the impacts have impacted other industries. Many local farms that relied on hotels to purchase their produce were left without consumers. By strengthening our local agriculture and aquaculture, we can continue to support hospitality while also expanding the market more broadly across our island to increase local food on our local store shelves and in the homes of local families.

Additional job creation in the renewable energy sector will both help our community reach our sustainability goals and contribute to the best version of our community that we can present to the world, displaying our values of taking care of our land and our people.

2) Tourism Management

HLTA has long maintained that we believe in the "quality" tourism model rather than the "quantity" tourism model. Effective execution of this responsible management model takes many

forms, one being the establishment of user impact fees at popular visitor attractions such as O‘ahu’s Hanauma Bay. Do you support user impact fees? Do you have other ideas that would embrace this model?

The establishment of the Hanauma Bay fund by prior administrations was a great opportunity to ensure funding would be available, provided by visitor fees, to maintain this important natural resource. We can apply that model to other critical resources as well.

In my Recovery Plan, I proposed implementing ideas like green visitor fees to help preserve our natural resources. These fees, along with visitor education, encourages visitors to take ownership of their trip to Hawai‘i. When coupled with education, we can shape visitors that adopt the concept of leaving Hawai‘i in a better condition than when they arrived. As they take this message back to their homes, we can generate a global appreciation for the true beauty of Hawai‘i’s islands and her people.

3) Real Property Tax

Hotels and lodgings historically have been among the highest real property taxpayers in all counties, paying from \$10.70 to \$13.90 per \$1,000 of assessed value. In FY2019-2020 alone, hotels were seven of the top ten taxpayers based on the amount of taxes levied. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, hotels have already come due on one installment of real property taxes, even though many of them have not generated revenue since March. As our industry looks to recover from the pandemic, will you oppose any increase in real property taxes over the next three years? Five years?

I am continuing to evaluate the financial condition of the City, and I know much of it will be revealed as residents and businesses alike continue to pay their property taxes over the next few months. The tourism industry has been particularly hard hit by the COVID-19 pandemic, and as a result, the jobs that many local families rely on have been jeopardized. I commit to approaching our City’s budget as equitably as possible, taking into account the financial impacts experienced by all sectors.

4) Transient Vacation Rentals

HLTA’s position has always been one of fairness, i.e., legal TVRs such as those on AirBnB or VRBO should be allowed to operate in areas that have been zoned for resorts so long as the property owner pays the real property taxes associated with a resort property, as well as the GET

and TAT. Where do you stand on this issue? Would you support a measure to increase enforcement to rein in the proliferation of properties that are operating illegally? Moreover, would you support an increase in the amount of the fine assessed to illegal operators?

I support fully enforcing the laws, as outlined in my Housing for All plan, and increasing fines for illegal operators. We must stop illegal vacation rentals from taking over our residential neighborhoods and return the 8,000 illegal vacation rentals to the market so that they will be available to our residents.

Resort-zoned areas are appropriate where other laws, including taxes, are followed; however, most of these units are in the areas our community has reserved as residential. Thus, short-term rentals drive down the availability of long-term rentals, which in turn increases the rents our local families have to pay due to the housing shortage, and interfere with the character of and quality of life in our residential neighborhoods. In addition, laws regulating TVRs and VRBOs better manage tourism and thus provide a safeguard for the many local jobs that rely on the hospitality industry.

5) Homelessness Solutions

In recent years, HLTA has dedicated significant time and resources to address homelessness in our community. In addition to funds generated through our Visitor Industry Charity Walk, we secured \$1 million in State matching funds that we used to subsidize the efforts of homeless service providers around the state. Please provide a detailed description of an initiative that you would implement to address homelessness in your county.

By implementing my Housing for All Plan, I intend to address many of the root causes of homelessness. We can achieve affordable housing as a community by stopping illegal vacation rentals; implementing a vacant home tax; being innovative with the technologies we support to build housing; increasing incentives, such as reducing fees, for building affordable units; and utilizing technology and streamlining to speed up the permitting process. Actual housing, however, is only part of the solution for the causes of homelessness.

As Mayor, I will also support increased support services, including for mental health and substance abuse treatment. The City must partner with the State to fill the gaps in the system, including leveraging CARES Act funds to support community health centers and increasing available resources.

6) Sustainability in the Visitor Industry

Hawai‘i’s visitor industry has gone to great lengths to make its businesses more “green” and eco-friendly. What government incentives would you propose or support to help our industry bolster these initiatives?

I would continue to partner with groups like the HLTA, Ko Olina Resort Operators Association, Waikīkī Business Improvement District Association, Waikīkī Beach Special Improvement District Association, Hawai‘i Transportation Association, Native Hawaiian Hospitality Association, Visitor Aloha Society of Hawai‘i, O‘ahu Visitor Bureau, and others to support the visitor industry, particularly in areas like Waikīkī, to facilitate programs and improvements that are “green” and eco-friendly. This includes supporting the transformation of pocket parks to increase clean, green space, to supporting beach restoration in needed areas.

The City can also be a partner to assist with bringing sea water air conditioning to Waikīkī to significantly decrease the carbon footprint in Honolulu, serve as a model for other key areas for our community, and help dramatically decrease operating expenses. I would also revisit ideas of the City and visitor industry partnering to create a more walkable Waikiki and to bring more workforce housing opportunities closer to resorts.

7) Visitor Industry Health, Safety & Security Standards

As the COVID-19 pandemic began to spread throughout our state, it became clear that establishing health and hygiene standards would be critical to restoring trust in our industry. As such, we developed the HLTA Health, Safety & Security Standards. These were created after reviewing the latest information from the CDC, WHO, and EPA, as well as input from industry stakeholders. Our standards were submitted to the State Department of Health for its review. After receiving DOH approval, we shared our standards with the governor, HI-EMA, State Attorney General, and all the mayors. Please answer yes or no: Would you support the adoption of our standards as statewide policy for lodging properties? If not, please explain.

I applaud HLTA for being proactive in developing protocols and support the intent of the standards. I believe that as community spread continues in ways that many may not have previously imagined, our number one priority needs to be the health and safety of our residents, including our visitor industry workforce. I believe that our visitor industry and hotel operators are best situated to lead the way, and I am ready to work hand in hand

with industry leaders, workforce, State, and key stakeholders to assess the public health situation as it exists at the time of implementation. It is clear that many of the standards outlined in the HLTA plan are in accordance with CDC and other health guidelines, and as such I can commit to supporting standards recommended by our public health and medical professionals. However, the recent impacts to the Kahala Hotel demonstrate that the DOH may not have the resources it needs to do appropriate tracing measures without operators leading the way.

My ultimate priority as Mayor is to ensure the safety and well-being of all of those on O‘ahu, residents and visitors alike. That means that my decisions would have to reflect the reality on the ground and be flexible to adjust to an ever-changing and dynamic situation.

HLTA Health, Safety, & Security Standards –

http://www.hawaiilodging.org/uploads/6/7/8/9/67899215/covid-19_health_safety___security_standards.pdf

8) PublicSafety

To date, HLTA has held two highly successful Visitor Public Safety Conferences on O‘ahu. These conferences have brought together hotel management, security professionals, lawmakers, law enforcement, social service providers, and other stakeholders to discuss possible solutions to issues such as late-night cabarets and the need for more security cameras throughout Waikiki, the homeless population in Chinatown, and a spike in shoplifting around the island. Each conference led to significant progress in addressing these community issues.

Neighbor Island Candidates Only: Would you support HLTA in convening a Visitor Public Safety Conference in your county in 2021? If so, what specific public health and safety issues would you like to see discussed?

O‘ahu Candidates Only: For O‘ahu’s third Visitor Public Safety Conference, to be held in 2021, what specific public health and safety issues would you like to see discussed?

Given our current state of contact tracing and testing, and understanding their importance in a safe reopening in light of the COVID-19 pandemic, we need to have a discussion about the needs of the hospitality industry and how equipped the State and Department of Health are to meet those needs. If, for example, a hotel experiences a cluster of COVID-19 positive cases amongst a group of workers or visitors, it is important that the hotel feel confident that the state Department of Health will respond in a timely matter, provide the necessary support, and be equipped to take all steps necessary to maintain public health and safety.

The last thing that we would want is for any business and its workers to be unsupported, which could pose a health risk to their families and the broader community.

It would also be valuable to discuss how the Honolulu Police Department can better respond to the needs of our community to reduce crime. While I'll be working with HPD and the City's Department of Human Resources to address the many vacancies and pending retirements within HPD, knowing the needs of the hospitality industry will allow us to develop policies to ensure law enforcement presence and enforcement. This includes a discussion of how to address the needs of shelter-resistant individuals in our homeless population, many of which are experiencing substance abuse issues. Additional activation of stakeholders could also help ensure passage of legislation similar to SB3065, limiting cabaret licenses to establishments within hotels. Through this we can eliminate the safety concerns that arise from freestanding establishments while still meeting the needs of our visitors in controlled settings.

I also believe that this topic could fall within a more broadly discussed topic of resiliency. Waikiki is situated uniquely to absorb large impacts from large storms, sea level rise, and other components of climate change. Finally, although homelessness has been a priority of HLTA and the conference in past years, it is clear that it continues to be an issue that impacts many communities. I would like to see this be an ongoing area of discussion and public-private partnership.

9) If elected, what do you hope to accomplish during your first year in office, which will undoubtedly be one of the most challenging and difficult times the state and counties have ever faced.

I intend to begin implementing my Recovery Plan and Housing for All Plan. Incorporating many of the ideas mentioned above, these plans will both move us towards meeting the housing needs of our local families and assist with our economic recovery. I will enact into ordinance the City's first comprehensive Climate Action Plan within my first 100 days to reduce greenhouse gas emissions, speed up the City's renewable energy goals, and move us towards better protecting spaces like Waikiki that are particularly vulnerable to the impacts of climate change.

10) Please share with us one fun fact about yourself.

I grew from 4 feet 9 inches to 5 feet 9 inches from the 10th to the 11th grade, but that's still nowhere near Mufi Hannemann's height.