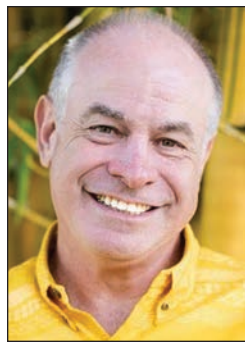


Creating a Sustainable Hawaii Island

An Interview with The Honorable Mitch Roth, Mayor, Hawaii Island

EDITORS' NOTE Mitch Roth has dedicated the past 27 years of his career to the safety and health of Hawaii Island residents. Prior to being elected Mayor, Roth served as the Prosecuting Attorney of Hawaii County – a role that he held since 2012. Under his leadership, the Hawaii County Office of the Prosecuting Attorney prosecuted several cold cases, implemented the first restorative justice program in a prosecutor's office nationally, created a sexual assault unit with attorneys experienced in such cases, and set up community outreach and training. During his tenure, he hired counselors to bolster victim services and assist victims of property crimes, and helped launch the Big Island Juvenile Intake and Assessment Center, whose work has contributed to a reduction in juvenile crime in the county by more than 50 percent. Roth has a bachelor's degree from the University of Hawaii at Manoa and a JD from Whittier Law School.



The Hon. Mitch Roth

the Governor to declare an energy emergency to bypass the Public Utilities Commission (PUC) and fast-track alternative energy projects. We have also stepped up to meet the needs of our residents by exponentially growing our pipeline of affordable housing projects while simultaneously working to address the many issues surrounding our building permitting process so that homes can be built in a timely and efficient fashion.

You mentioned the request for the Governor to declare an energy emergency based on rising fuel costs and to fast-track renewable energy projects that are currently under review. How concerned are you about Hawaii's current energy situation?

We believe we could be at 100 percent renewable energy by sometime mid-2023 if every production hub were able to operate in our grid at total capacity. Between the myriad of solar, wind, geothermal, and biomass plants on the island, we can produce more than enough energy to power our island at cheap and affordable rates – once the prices are no longer tied to oil. However, our main concern lies in the semantics, and our valid worry is that we will continue to trip over our own feet in attempting to meet our state's 2045 renewable energy goal or Hawaiian Electric's 2035 renewable energy goal. There seems to be a disconnect between what is "right" and what is "technically" the right thing to do. The price of fuel will only continue to grow, and global tensions, such as we see in Ukraine, will only exacerbate the issue. Without cheaper, better alternatives to fossil fuels, we will always have a high cost of living. We must be more creative if we ever wish to meet our renewable energy goals and attain a more sustainable quality of life for our local families.

How critical is it to make Hawaii more energy self-sufficient and what needs to be done to begin the journey to build a sustainable energy future for Hawaii?

Energy resilience and independence is a significant first step toward creating a sustainable Hawaii Island where our keiki can thrive and succeed for generations to come. However, we must also look at the issue as encompassing affordable housing, cost of living, and economic development. Without

focusing on those aspects as a part of energy self-sufficiency, we will be left with a fully powered community of strangers. In other words, if we don't grow all of the main facets of our community in tandem, we won't be left with a thriving community in the end. That is why we must lump those factors into energy because it can create quality jobs and eventually lower the cost of living for all of our residents.

What do you feel are the keys to addressing the energy crisis in Hawaii and what additional steps should be taken to drive lasting, sustainable change?

Government needs to learn to get out of the way. Although we value oversight and must ensure that whatever energy sources we bring online are reliable, good for the planet and its people, and most importantly, resilient, we must also recognize the pitfalls of over-regulation and its effect on smaller local companies wishing to assist in statewide energy independence. Government bodies, particularly the PUC, need to favor assistance rather than deterrence. I believe that if we want to see this systematic change, we need to walk-the-walk and do everything we can as mayors to remove roadblocks on our end so that the state has no excuse not to remove barriers on theirs. We must work together and view these matters holistically if we want to move the needle. It's not enough to talk; we must act – together.

How important is a strong public-private partnership in addressing Hawaii's energy future?

Public/private partnerships are the only way we will move Hawaii forward, particularly in terms of our energy future. As a government entity, we have many restrictions on how we're able to spend and operate – the private sector does not. Where we have leeway is in the ability to create thoughtful incentives that are beneficial to private partners. What we lack in capital can be made up by a shared agreement and a willingness to work with our partners to find areas where all parties benefit. If we share a common vision for Hawaii, there is no reason that we shouldn't do everything we can to work together and accomplish that vision. Hawaii County continues to welcome bold ideas and unconventional partnerships as part of our efforts to build a sustainable Hawaii Island for us all, and we are very proud of that. ●

What interested you in public service and becoming Hawaii Island Mayor?

As the Prosecuting Attorney for the County of Hawaii and father of three, I found myself stuck in between two very sobering realities for our local families: watching my keiki (child) leave the state for more stable and lucrative opportunities elsewhere and watching the adverse effects of an economy and a housing market that has left behind those it was intended to care for most. That didn't sit right. I knew that if we wanted to shift the paradigm and end the exodus of our local keiki and ultimately our local families, we would need to create an island community that allows our keiki to thrive and succeed. Through that vision, I sought election to the Office of the Mayor to put that philosophy and passion at the helm of our county.

What are your key priorities for Hawaii Island as it faces multiple challenges, including rising energy costs, a global pandemic, and inflation?

Our priority is to create an island where our keiki can thrive and succeed for generations to come. To do that, we have emphasized lowering our dependence on outside resources by ramping up local food production, converting our entire county fleet to electric or alternative energy vehicles, including public transportation, and urging