RES26-138
Testimony

MISC. COMM. 218

COUNCIL

COUNCIL Meeting

Meeting Date: Jun 3, 2026 @ 10:00 AM

Support: 0

Oppose: 1

I wish to comment: 0

Name:	Email:	Zip:
Brett Kulbis	brett.kulbis@use.startmail.com	96706
Representing:	Position:	Submitted:
Self	Oppose	May 29, 2026 @ 11:20 AM

Testimony:

Chair, Vice Chair, and Councilmembers,

Mahalo for the opportunity to testify. I am writing in strong opposition to Resolution 26-138 because the City should not be rewarded with a smoother land exchange after decades of failing to keep its promises to the families of Varona Village. As a resident of ʻEwa Beach, I have watched this promise to Varona Village stretch on for most of my adult life.

The current request is narrowly framed as a revised equalization payment for the Varona Village / Ewa Drum property exchange, increasing the approved payment from $415,323 to $491,700 because of a consumer price index update requested during the federal review process. This additional cost exists only because the transaction has dragged on for years. But the larger context matters. The City has spent more than thirty years promising revitalization, homeownership, and stability in Varona Village while allowing long delays, deteriorating conditions, and repeated deferrals of meaningful action.

Varona Village was part of a long-running City effort tied to the acquisition and redevelopment of Ewa Villages, with plans dating back to around 1990 to create ownership opportunities and preserve the plantation community. Those promises did not turn into timely delivery. Residents and public reporting documented frustration that the City did not follow through on repairing and revitalizing the village, even as conditions worsened. This was not a short delay or a minor administrative hiccup. The project languished for a generation, and by 2002 reporting still described the City as searching for a private developer while demolishing some homes in poor condition. Even the City's modern messaging admits the redevelopment is about fulfilling a commitment "over thirty years in the making," which is another way of admitting that the commitment was not fulfilled when it should have been. This is not just an old story; it is an ongoing failure of stewardship that residents are still living with today.

Resolution 26-138 states that the exchange remains in the public interest because the City needs to operate and maintain the Rail Operations Center at the Ewa Drum Site, while DHHL will use the Varona sites for housing development for Native Hawaiian beneficiaries. No one disputes the importance of rail operations or Native Hawaiian housing, but good purposes do not excuse a bad process or a bad record. The resolution also says the only change is a higher equalization payment driven by inflation and the federal review process. But this framing leaves out the central moral and political issue: the City is seeking approval to complete another transactional step involving Varona Village without first reckoning with its own long pattern of nonperformance there. After all these years of delay, the City is now positioned to transfer or restructure interests in land connected to Varona while presenting the move as orderly progress, even though many residents could reasonably see it as the City handing off responsibility after failing to do the hard work itself.

The revised payment exists only because the closing dragged out long enough for the U.S. Department of the Interior to request an updated inflation adjustment through an estimated 2026 closing. Taxpayers are now being asked to absorb a higher payment while residents are asked to trust the same City that did not deliver on its promises when it had direct control over the property's future.

The City should not treat the existence of a later public-private partnership as proof that it has finally made good on its promises. Public materials about the current redevelopment describe a partnership with Savio/Hawai'i Habitat Varona Village LLC and explain that the project will renovate homes, create a condominium property regime, and give tenants of record a chance to buy or continue renting. Those may be worthwhile goals, but they do not erase the long years in which the City failed to protect or revitalize Varona Village itself. And they do not justify asking taxpayers to quietly approve an additional payment without first demanding accountability for those years of inaction.

The Council should reject Resolution 26-138, or at minimum defer action until the City publicly and clearly answers two basic questions:

1. Exactly what enforceable protections will exist for current tenants, especially kupuna and low-income families, before the City completes additional property actions tied to Varona Village?

2. Why should taxpayers approve a higher payment caused by delay when the City has not first provided a full public accounting of that delay and its consequences?

Rejecting or deferring this measure is the only way to send a clear signal that broken promises and long delays will no longer be rewarded with automatic approvals. Until those questions are answered, approving Resolution 26-138 would send the wrong message. It would tell residents that the City can neglect a community for decades, miss its promises, and still come back for cleaner approvals and more money once it is convenient.

Mahalo for your consideration and for your service to our community.

Brett Kulbis
U.S. Navy Retired
Ewa Beach