



The Maui News / CHELSEA DUNCAN photos

At left, Joe Pluta poses in front of a map showing the location of the planned West Maui Hospital and Medical Center to be built makai of the Kaanapali Coffee Farms. Above, Pluta holds up a West Maui Hospital & Medical Center Foundation T-shirt featuring a logo designed by his daughter.

# A win for W. Maui

## Longtime Maui Realtor believes a new hospital will boost public safety and real estate market

By CHELSEA DUNCAN, Special Sections Editor

Joe Pluta sees a bright future ahead for West Maui's real estate market. For close to two decades, he and his partners have pushed for the construction of a hospital on the west side that he knows beyond a doubt will make the community a safer — and therefore more valuable — place to live.

There have been plenty of hurdles and naysayers throughout the uphill battle that many said would be impossible to win. But just last month, the land entitlements needed to start the project received their final approval from the Maui Planning Commission, following the County Council's approval in May. Pluta breathed a sigh of relief as his part in the saga winded down, with the final phases now in the hands of developer Brian Hoyle, president of Newport Hospital Corp., who is expected to apply for construction permits within a month for the the West Maui Hospital and Medical Center.

For Pluta, in real estate for 47 years — 37 on Maui, 10 on Oahu — and owner-principal broker of Joseph D. Pluta

Realty LLC, making his community a safer place to live has been a top priority.

"If you want to find a No. 1 concern anywhere in the world, it's going to be health and safety," he said.

His work to improve West Maui didn't begin with the hospital. He saw early on that the area, despite its large share of property taxes provided to the government, was lacking in several public service areas, from parks and road systems to fire protection and public health.

"It affects the real estate market and values here," he said. "Because if it's not safe to live someplace or if the roads are inadequate and all these infrastructural needs that people should have are inadequate, well, it depresses prices and nobody wants to live there, necessarily."

Pluta joined other like-minded community members and in 1980 founded the West Maui Taxpayers Association (WMTA), a lobbying organization with the intent to ensure that the area would receive its fair share of tax-funded improvements by the state and county.

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## West Maui

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One of the top projects that stemmed from the association's work involved building a fire and ambulance station in Napili in the '90s.

Efforts to build the station led to the creation of the West Maui Improvement Foundation (WMIF), a nonprofit with a public charity designation that was able to accept tax-deductible donations — including the land donated for the site. Funds were privately raised to build the station, with the county taking over operations upon completion.

No other community in Hawaii had undertaken such a project, Pluta said, and people had been skeptical. But the result was improved public safety and drastically lower costs for fire insurance for property owners, which ultimately provided a return on their

financial investment in the station.

"Our logic was so sound. They couldn't argue with the logic," he said. "And sure enough, we did it."

Other achievements accomplished through the WMTA and WMIF include improvements to the Lahaina Youth Center, the creation of Napili Park and the Lahaina Skate Park, improvements to Honoapiilani Highway and pushing for the Lahaina Bypass, among many others.

But the largest undertaking has remained the push for a West Maui hospital. Under the best of circumstances, Pluta said, it can take an hour for someone on the west side to arrive in an ambulance to the Maui Memorial Medical Center Emergency Room after calling 911. Traffic or a road block, for example, can delay care even more.

Not long after the fire and ambulance station opened, work be-

gan to determine what it would take to build a hospital. What would follow was years worth of studies, negotiations, land use processes and recovery from the financial meltdown. The biggest hurdle, besides finding the millions of dollars needed to back the project, was obtaining a certificate of need from the State Health Planning Development Association that would deem the project worthy, finally granted in 2009.

The West Maui Hospital and Medical Center calls for a 24-hour emergency department, 16 medical surgical beds, nine critical-care beds, three operating rooms, a diagnostic radiology department and outpatient services, among other services, according to the hospital's website. Plans call for the hospital, which will be located on Kakaalaneo Road, makai of the Kaanapali Coffee Farms, to open in 2017 with additional phases to follow.

The county has been working with Newport Hospital Corp. to get final permits in order, Mayor Alan Arakawa said during the annual Mayor's Luncheon last week.

"It's very exciting," Arakawa said, according to a Maui News report. "We've been working for years with the hospital, but we're getting to where things are getting done."

Once the hospital is built, Pluta expects more benefits for the community to fall into place, from road improvements, high-paying jobs in high-tech fields and additional housing.

"It's going to spring-start incredible real estate values, improvements and growth and development here," he said.

Now able to look beyond the West Maui hospital, Pluta can focus more on sales, including his listings in Kaanapali Golf Estates and Papakea Resort. But he remains president of WMIF and di-

rector of WMTA and hopes to next tackle issues including homelessness, affordable housing and traffic.

The hospital, he expects, will help alleviate some of those issues. Noting that some 10,000 people commute to the west side for work each day, Pluta said more affordable housing needs to be built in the area to accommodate at least a portion of that population. With the hospital as the incentive to create more development, more affordable homes are likely to follow, he said. If fewer workers have to commute, that will ease traffic on the roads.

No doubt there will be more land use laws to tackle, more funds to raise and more skeptics to win over along the way. But Pluta, crediting his faith in God, knows that what's best for the community will prevail.

"These things are essential," he said. "They're going to happen."



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