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Kauai builders try to hire local as demand for workers grows

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As construction projects mushroom on Kauai, developers and contractors are trying to meet their labor needs with local workers.

With dozens of projects clustered in Poipu, Princeville and Kauai's population corridor between Puhi and Kapaa, local contractors and developers are utilizing all the island's construction labor resources, drawing workers from other islands and the Mainland when necessary.

Estimates vary, but by some counts more than 50 resort, residential and commercial projects have been approved for zoning or are in various states of planning or construction on Kauai today. As many as 11,000 individual new housing and resort units have been zoned and could be built in the next five years.

Todd Lang, project manager for Lihue-based **Unlimited Construction Services Inc.**, said his company has been largely able to take local workers from the carpentry and masonry union from job to job.

For the most part, the Hawaii Carpenters Union Local 745 has been able to provide adequate manpower, Lang said, adding that Unlimited has used tradesmen from the Mainland to provide technical expertise only when not available locally.

Unlimited has overseen recent projects such as the Kauai State Judiciary Complex and the Botanical Research Center for the National Tropical Botanical Garden in Kalaheo.

Currently, Unlimited is building the **Westin Princeville Ocean Resort**, almost 80 percent complete, on Kauai's North Shore.

Also in Princeville are three major projects built by developer **QEBIII LLC** -- Villas on the Prince (2002), Villas of Kamalii (2004) and Kaiulani of Princeville, a resort residential development of 77 attached single-family homes slated for completion in mid-2008.

QEBIII principal Don Schultz said the scale of these projects has put a large dent in the local labor supply with hundreds of workers devoted to the completion of what he called the North Shore's largest project.

"We have a policy of attempting to hire on-island as much as possible," Schultz said. "Hiring locally adds something to the project."



For these three Princeville developments, QEBIII has worked closely with Lihue-based general contractor **Shioi Construction** and used subcontractors from Oahu and the Big Island only when Kauai companies couldn't meet the project's demands. Neighbor Island air-conditioning, and tile and water feature/pool contractors were hired and they brought over their employees.

Shioi Construction President Conrad Murashige said off-island subcontractors were hired only for specialty trades, always in small crews and none from out of state.

"If we have a time crunch, we import drywall people from Oahu to catch up with the schedule," he said.

Likewise, Shioi may send Kauai workers to Oahu depending on scheduling, but Murashige said maintaining a balance hasn't been a problem.

He said the biggest challenge in using off-island labor is providing housing accommodations -- a commodity that is always in short supply in Kauai's tight rental market.

On Kauai's South Shore, Thad Bond, vice president of planning and development for **Kukuiula Development Co.** (Hawaii), by far Kauai's largest residential project, said the company has bought more than 20 apartment units in Koloa to accommodate off-island workers brought in for construction.

Scott Underwood, vice president of operations for Brookfield Homes Hawaii, agrees. He said the company may use one or two hard-goods suppliers from the Mainland, but expects most of the labor for its Kauai projects to come from Kauai.

Brookfield is building two town-home communities on Kauai -- the almost-completed 102-unit Nihilani at **Princeville Resort** and the 191-unit Pilimai at Poipu to be completed in 2010.

There are at least 17 construction projects proposed, planned, approved or under construction in the Koloa-Poipu area alone. Other planned developments are under way at Port Allen and Waimea on Kauai's less-developed West Side.

Another major South Shore development, Koloa Landing, will see 323 condominium units completed in Poipu by the end of 2009.

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