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**Wood mill gains
opposition**

Some Ookala residents
worried about traffic, noise

by Peter Sur
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OOKALA -- The Ookala Sugar Mill shut down years ago, and with it this North Hilo town fell silent.



Ookala resident Dr. Tawn Keeney stands in front of the shuttered Ookala sugar mill on Friday. A \$30 million lumber veneer mill is planned on this site, with new structures on either side of the large blue building. Logs would be stacked up on the large flat pad, center, with a crane in the middle of the pad. - Peter Sur/Tribune-Herald

That could all change soon, because a bill that would give \$25 million for a lumber veneer mill in Ookala, on the site of the old sugar mill, has been sent to Gov. Linda Lingle.

As she decides whether to sign or veto the bill, some community members are sounding the alarm.

Under a bill introduced by Rep. Dwight Takamine, D-Kohala-Hamakua-Hilo, Tradewinds Forest Products, based in Portland, Ore., would be issued special purpose revenue bonds up to \$25 million for the construction of a veneer mill.

Lumber would be harvested from nonnative eucalyptus trees on 8,875 acres of the Waiakea Timber Management Area, turned into veneer at the Ookala mill and shipped out of Hilo Harbor to the mainland. Timber from eucalyptus trees on areas surrounding the mill would also be used. The mill would cost \$30 million.

Hilo Rep. Jerry Chang was the only House member to vote against the bill in its final reading, which was sent to Lingle May 5.

Lingle spokesman Russell Pang said the status of the bill would be known by June 26, when the governor is required to inform the Legislature of her decision. Final action must be taken by July 11.

Ookala resident and local physician Tawn Keeney, who himself is opposed to the mill, knocked on every door in Ookala over several Sundays to ask residents what they thought of the mill.

He received 41 signatures from people opposed to the mill, 14 in favor of it and 38 who had "insufficient information" to make a decision.

"A lot of people just didn't know," Keeney said. "The overwhelming response is, 'We don't

know hardly anything about it."

One Ookala resident, whose home is not far from the old sugar mill, visited the Boise Cascade veneer mill in Willamina, Ore., that Tradewinds President Don Bryan touted as a "model."

"He said that was an 'appalling experience,' Keeney said.

Speaking from Portland, Bryan said in his meetings with Ookala community members the reaction was overwhelmingly positive because of the opportunity for new jobs that were lacking since the end of the sugar industry.

"Naturally, there's nothing that you can build that somebody can't oppose. We have operated pretty much with the uninterrupted strong support of officials and (others)."

Also cited as possible concerns is the potential for the constant arrival and departure of trucks, an infusion of coqui frogs and other pests, the lack of an environmental assessment and whether Tradewinds is a viable business entity.

Bryan outlined plans for the mill in a letter to the community a month ago.

"We have made a commitment to build at Ookala," Bryan writes. "Our veneer mill will process eucalyptus logs into veneer, sheets of dried wood measuring 4 foot-by-8 foot and 1/8 inch thick, such as the plies used in manufacturing plywood. This is a mechanical, not chemical process. Wood is cut from blocks of rotating wood on a lathe, using an 8'-foot long blade. The wood will be dried in veneer dryers and then sent to manufacturers to be made into plywood or engineered wood products such as laminated veneer lumber. Once the veneer mill is up and running smoothly, we hope to expand the manufacturing process to include a small plywood lay-up facility."

Also included in the plans is a "co-generation plant" that would burn scrap wood and greenwaste. It would generate the energy to drive the plant and steam for the veneer dryers, and excess power would be sold to Hawaii Electric Light Co.

Keeney's greatest concern is about the potential for noise. Bryan addresses noise in his letter:

"Yes, there will be some noise. Trucks will come and go. The turbine will hum. There will be some noise associated with moving logs after arrival. The mill and receiving areas are being designed to keep trucks as far away as possible from residences and eliminate the need for backup alarms on yard equipment," it states.

The machinery would all be enclosed, limiting noise emissions, Bryan said.

"The regulations say on industrial zoned land that you are limited to 70 decibels at the property line, and 70 decibels is normal conversation level," Bryan said. The company has recently hired a sound engineer to make sure the noise level stays "considerably below" that level.

Bryan's answers have not satisfied people like Scott Enright, who is circulating a flyer with the "top 10 questions" about the mill and power plant.

"Tradewinds says they will be 'environmentally friendly.'" Enright's flyer states. "BUT their power plant will have a smoke stack, and their mill yard will be creating dust and sawdust, all known to be respiratory irritants that variable winds will blow right into our

homes."

When fully operational, the mill would create around 100 jobs, not including from logging and trucking contractors. Twenty-five employees would be used in the power plant, with the remainder in the veneer mill. The output would result in about 10 truckloads of veneer per day.

Tradewinds was issued a license in 1999 to harvest timber from the Waiakea forest. However, the company encountered financial difficulties within months of being awarded the license and has been seeking funding for the operation ever since. As a result, the company had missed several deadlines for the timber license and was twice in jeopardy of being found in default.

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