

A call to action

By Kristine Kubat

Thursday, June 12, 2008 2:40 PM HST

Maurice Kaya served the State of Hawai`i as the director of its Energy Division for 20 years. Working within the confines of a department primarily responsible for business, economic development and tourism, he became known for his stoic persona, perfected during the height of the controversy over geothermal development.

At the beginning of 2003, Kaya was appointed Chief Technology Officer for the department. In this role he directed a planning process that sought to increase the state's competitiveness in the defense, renewable energy, biotechnology and ocean science industries.

Those familiar with Kaya's professional history could appreciate his opening comments at the energy forum, where he announced that since he no longer works for the state he would be taking advantage of the freedom to say whatever he likes. What followed was a call to activism -- the sort that foiled him as director but now represents the best hope for real change in his lifetime.

"Folks, the crisis is here and it's gonna be a long one," said Kaya. "It's time we start doing something about it."

As Kaya continued by calling our over reliance on oil "precarious," there was nothing fresh about this part of his analysis. Local energy players have been hearing the same rhetoric from Kaya, the bureaucrat, for years. What was surprising was his desire to distance himself from the status quo, which he said, "carries way too much risk for you and me." He went on to incite action in support of "a major transformation of the markets and business models" we have relied on thus far. Central to the success of his movement is not government but grassroots politics.

His first target -- efficiency measures, which he characterized as "logical investments." Kaya emphasized setting standards for superior building performance as the means for achieving maximum gains. He sent those inclined to listen to his call in the direction of local government officials. "This is largely a county thing," he said when explaining how such high standards would get codified into law. Pointing to the Natural Energy Lab's Gateway Center, the `Imiloa Astronomy Center, and the Kohala Public Library as the right examples, Kaya urged Hawai`i Islanders to be much more forceful in demanding that government not only build but regulate with efficiency in mind. "Keep them from being swayed solely on a first cost basis," he said of the number crunching that often deems these superior technologies out of reach. "I've seen this time and again."

Declaring his vision "for a model utility that is zero-dependent on imported fuel," Kaya went on to his second target -- innovative strategies for the generation of electricity. Here his statewide model includes not only the controversial geothermal resource but the even more controversial idea of exporting it from this to other islands. Back in the 1990s, that plan was shot down when it was revealed that the preferred route for an undersea power cable lay through humpback whale breeding grounds. Kaya used this part of his presentation to share his take home lesson from the geothermal wars -- that while we all have to think big when addressing the problem of over reliance on oil, the solutions must be community-based.

Moving on to the issue of transportation fuels, Kaya says that although biofuels are also generating controversy, he sees them playing a critical role in the mix. He also claims that their production would help preserve critical agricultural lands without saying how. Multi-millions is his estimate of the current level of investment in local development of this new industry. In a state that not too long ago relied on vast fields of cultivated sugar to fuel its economic engine, there is a considerable amount of corporate support for his Kaya's vision. The state's former energy czar also talked about hydrogen as a transportation fuel. He, along with many others, looks to excess capacity at the Puna Geothermal plant as a source of the energy required to produce that increasingly popular fuel.

Returning to his theme of grassroots political will, Kaya asks the audience, "How many of your mayoral candidates are taking in this issue?" Senator Lorraine Inouye, who served as Hawai`i Island mayor during a critical juncture of the development of geothermal power here, was the only mayoral candidate in attendance. (Kona councilor Angel Pilago did donate a portion of his discretionary funding to pay for the event.) During the lunch break, after Kaya's talk, Inouye stated that Kaya's vision "has always been a part of my platform."

Hawai`i's newest energy activist ended his presentation by challenging the audience: "Set lofty targets," he exclaimed. "Do not be limited by what others say cannot be done. Network, organize, empower and enable. Enable change agents in our youth, then get out of the way. Demand clean energy. Lead or get out of the way."