PRELIMINARY REPORT

HAWAIʻI STATE PLANNING ACT UPDATE
FRAMEWORK RESEARCH REPORT
MARCH 23, 2026

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INTRODUCTION

Pursuant to Act 36, Session Laws of Hawai‘i (“SLH”) 2024, the Office of Planning and Sustainable Development (OPSD) has been charged with updating the Hawai‘i State Planning Act. Codified in HRS Chapter 226, the Act serves as a broad policy framework guiding state and local agencies. Enacted in 1978, it was intended to improve planning processes, enhance the effectiveness of public and private actions, strengthen interagency coordination, promote the wise use of Hawai‘i’s resources, and guide the state’s future development (HRS § 226-1). A comprehensive review conducted between 1983 and 1985 marked its last major update. This effort seeks to ensure the Act reflects current priorities, challenges, and opportunities.

This document reviews existing literature on the State Planning Act and related planning frameworks to inform the update. It begins with an overview of the Act’s history, objectives, and five thematic policy areas. It then examines more recent plans within Hawai‘i, and in other states, to better understand how planning authority is structured and exercised. The document also incorporates preliminary findings from interviews with public and nonprofit stakeholders. It concludes with insights from this analysis to guide the State Planning Act update.

BACKGROUND

State Planning Act Update

OPSD is currently in Phase II of the State Planning Act update. Phase I focused on data collection across the thirteen coordinating agencies identified in the original Act. This effort evaluated the status of each agency’s functional plans, as well as relevant plans beyond these agencies (Phase I Update Report). Findings indicate that while many functional plans are outdated, the Act’s original intent remains largely intact.

Phase II builds on these findings to strengthen statewide planning coordination. The Department of Urban and Regional Planning at the University of Hawai‘i at Mānoa has been contracted to support OPSD in this effort, including conducting stakeholder interviews across public, private, and nonprofit sectors. These interviews aim to identify gaps in communication and plan implementation. In parallel, OPSD is undertaking technical studies and community engagement to ensure sufficient depth of analysis to enhance the effectiveness of the State Planning Act.

1986 State Planning Act

The Hawai‘i State Planning Act establishes a framework to guide the state’s long-term development through three overarching goals:

1. A strong, viable economy characterized by stability, diversity, and growth, supporting the needs of present and future generations.
2. A high-quality physical environment defined by natural beauty, cleanliness, stability, and ecological integrity, promoting public well-being.
3. The physical, social, and economic well-being of Hawai‘i’s people, fostering community responsibility, care, and civic participation.

To advance these goals, the Act identifies twelve functional areas:

1. Agriculture
2. Conservation Lands
3. Education

4. Energy
5. Health
6. Higher Education
7. Historic Preservation
8. Housing
9. Recreation
10. Tourism
11. Transportation
12. Water Resources

These areas informed the development of detailed State Functional Plans, with ten adopted in 1984 and the remaining two in 1985. During the subsequent revision process, the Act was further organized into five thematic areas, grouping related policy priorities based on stakeholder input.

The Economy

The 1986 Hawai‘i State Planning Act reflected economic concerns centered on the decline of primary commercial crops, particularly pineapple and sugarcane, and the state's growing reliance on the visitor industry. Today, tourism remains a central pillar of Hawai‘i's economy, supporting roughly 200,000 jobs and generating about $40 million in daily visitor spending.[1] This activity accounts for approximately 20 percent of the state's economy, closely mirroring its share in 1986. The consistency suggests that Hawai‘i's tourism sector may have reached a relative "saturation point," with tourism typically comprising 20–25 percent of the overall economy. Supporting this view, the share of GDP attributable to four tourism-intensive industries – retail trade; transportation and warehousing; arts, entertainment, and recreation; and accommodation and food services – remained largely stable from 2007 to 2019, declining by only one percentage point in total nominal GDP. While modestly decreasing, these sectors continue to represent a significant and steady component of the state's economic base.[2]

Following the COVID-19 pandemic, the visitor industry has largely rebounded. In 2024, visitor arrivals reached 95.5 percent of 2019 levels, while visitor spending rose to 116.6 percent. This indicates that although slightly fewer visitors are traveling to Hawai‘i, overall expenditures have increased. However, the sector remains sensitive to external factors, including policy changes, mainland economic conditions, and geopolitical dynamics, particularly those affecting the Japanese visitor market, which has yet to fully recover.[2]

In response to these vulnerabilities, economic diversification has remained a longstanding policy objective since 1986. The State Planning Act emphasizes fostering a business climate that supports both the expansion of existing industries and the development of new ones. Looking ahead, sectors such as real estate, government, and healthcare are expected to play an increasingly important role in broadening Hawai‘i's economic base. Among these, real estate is projected to remain a consistently strong driver in the near term.[3]

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[1] https://www.hawaiitourismauthority.org/media/11276/tourism-econ-impact-fact-sheet-june-2023.pdf

[2] https://dbedt.hawaii.gov/economic/files/2020/04/GDP_Report_Final_April2020.pdf

[3] https://uhero.hawaiii.edu/uhero-forecast-for-the-state-of-hawaii%CA%BBi-mild-recession-and-weak-recovery-in-2026/

Population
Hawai‘i’s population growth is projected to slow steadily in the coming decades, with deaths expected to outpace births by the mid-2030s. An aging population, identified as one of the most defining features of recent projections, has driven this trend since around 2010, when the baby boomer generation began reaching age 65. As a result, average annual population growth was modest at 0.61 percent between 2010 and 2020 and is expected to decline further, reaching approximately 0.12 percent between 2040 and 2050.[4]

At the time of the 1986 State Planning Act, policymakers and the public had already expressed a preference for slower population growth than the state was experiencing. The geographic distribution of growth has remained relatively consistent over the past 50 years. While O‘ahu has seen the largest absolute increases, the neighbor islands of Kaua‘i, Hawai‘i Island, and Maui, have generally grown at faster rates. Looking ahead, all four counties are projected to experience continued deceleration, with growth rates at or below 1 percent by 2040–2050.

Recent trends, however, suggest a more immediate shift. Since 2020, Hawai‘i’s population has declined annually. Most recently, the state recorded a decrease of 2,132 residents, or 0.15 percent from 2024. This decline is driven largely by net domestic out-migration, with 8,876 individuals leaving the state for other parts of the United States in 2025. These patterns indicate that population decline may be occurring earlier and more sharply than previously projected, ahead of the mid-2030s timeline identified in earlier forecasts.[4]

The Physical Environment
The environmental component of the 1986 Hawai‘i State Planning Act emphasized the preservation of natural beauty, public access to landscapes, and stewardship of the state’s unique ecosystems. Its focus was largely grounded in broad principles of conservation and the protection of environmental quality to support residents’ physical and mental well-being. However, the Act addressed these concerns at a high level, with limited attention to specific environmental risks or long-term ecological challenges.

Since its adoption, environmental issues in Hawai‘i have grown more complex and urgent. Climate change, coastal erosion, sea level rise, and ecosystem degradation have significantly elevated the role of environmental planning in state policy. The Hawai‘i State Climate Commission’s 2025 Annual Report highlights key priorities, including wastewater and cesspool management, the transition to renewable energy, waste reduction and recycling, transportation-related emissions, and youth engagement in sustainability efforts.

These evolving priorities signal a shift from the broad conservation ethos of the 1986 framework toward a more targeted and operational approach to environmental management. Contemporary planning must balance resource preservation with proactive strategies to mitigate climate-related risks and infrastructure vulnerabilities. As the State Planning Act is updated, environmental policy will likely require stronger integration across land use planning, climate adaptation, and resource management systems.

[4] https://files.Hawai‘i.gov/dbedt/economic/data_reports/LRF/2050-long-range-projections.pdf

Facility Systems

The 1986 State Planning Act identified several critical facility systems essential for supporting the state's functions, including solid and liquid waste management, water supply, transportation infrastructure, and energy and telecommunications networks. The Plan emphasized maintaining reliable infrastructure capable of accommodating population growth and economic development. Today, many of these systems face new challenges that were either underdeveloped or absent in the original plan. Waste management has emerged as a particularly urgent issue. Under Act 125 (2017), Hawai'i has mandated the removal or upgrade of all cesspools by 2050. Progress, however, has been slow. Roughly 400 cesspools are replaced annually, far short of the 3,400 needed each year to meet the deadline.

Solid waste management presents additional concerns. The Waimānalo Gulch Sanitary Landfill, O'ahu's primary facility, is projected to close by 2028, raising questions about long-term disposal strategies. These developments underscore the growing importance of waste infrastructure in state planning.

Water management has also evolved since 1986. Integrated frameworks, such as the One Water Honolulu initiative, emphasize holistic management of drinking water, stormwater, and wastewater systems. This approach reflects a shift toward treating water resources as interconnected rather than isolated infrastructure components.

Transportation and energy systems face new pressures as well. Hawai'i recently recorded an eighteen-year high in traffic fatalities, highlighting the need for enhanced transportation safety measures. Simultaneously, the state has set ambitious climate goals, including achieving net-zero greenhouse gas emissions by 2045. Meeting this target will require substantial transformation of energy systems, including expanded renewable energy infrastructure and improved energy efficiency.

These evolving challenges demonstrate the need for a more integrated, forward-looking approach to facility systems planning in Hawai'i. Updating the State Planning Act presents an opportunity to better align infrastructure planning with environmental objectives and long-term economic development.

Socio-Cultural Advancement

The 1986 State Planning Act emphasized enhancing the well-being of Hawai'i's residents through investments in education, public safety, housing, and healthcare, framing these areas as essential to community stability and social cohesion.

Education remains a central priority. The Hawai'i Department of Education's 2023–2029 Strategic Plan focuses on improving student outcomes and strengthening workforce readiness. Despite these efforts, challenges persist. According to the Aloha Challenge Equitable Education Tracker, roughly 10.9% of Hawai'i's youth aged 16 to 24 are neither employed nor enrolled in school. Additionally, about 68% of residents live in childcare deserts, highlighting significant gaps in early childhood services.

Public safety and criminal justice have also evolved. The Hawai‘i Department of the Attorney General tracks crime trends through a statewide dashboard, showing modest year-over-year reductions in crime rates ranging from approximately 1.5% to 12.1% across different categories.

Affordable housing, however, has emerged as one of Hawai‘i’s most pressing social challenges. The state consistently ranks among the least affordable housing markets in the United States. In 2022, Hawai‘i was the third least affordable market nationwide, after Santa Clara and Los Angeles counties. Estimates indicate a shortfall of roughly 25,000 affordable units for extremely low-income renters, underscoring the scale of the housing crisis.

Planning Governance Framework Under the 1978 State Planning Act

When the State Planning Act was codified in 1978, it clearly defined the roles of state and county governments in planning through two key mechanisms. First, it established thirteen functional plan areas to guide the implementation of the Act’s objectives. These areas were designed to address the five major thematic priorities of the State Planning Act and are intended to be updated by their respective state agencies every two to six years. Table 1 presents the functional plan areas and responsible agencies.

“The Functional Plans primarily address priority actions that should be taken within a two- to six- year period. This time frame coincides with the Biennial Budget and Capital Improvement Program budgetary cycles. The plans primarily affect State operations; however, recommendations for coordinated actions at the Federal, County and private sector levels are also included (State of Hawai‘i, Department of Business, Economic Development and Tourism, Hawai‘i Housing, Development, and Finance Corporation, 2017, p.2).”

Table 1. Functional Plan Areas, Associated Agencies, and Update Timeline

Functional Area	Agency	Most Recent Plan
Agriculture	Department of Agriculture	1991
Conservation Lands	Department of Land and Natural Resources	1991
Education	Department of Education	1989
Employment	Department of Labor and Industrial Relations	1991
Energy	Department of Business, Economic Development and Tourism, State Energy Office	1991
Health	Department of Health	1989
Higher Education	University of Hawai‘i, Office of Vice President for Administration	1984
Historic Preservation	Department of Land and Natural Resources, State Historic Preservation Division	1991
Housing	Department of Business, Economic Development	2017

	and Tourism, Hawai‘i Housing, Development, and Finance Corporation	
Human Services	Department of Health, Developmental Disabilities Division	1989
Recreation	Department of Land and Natural Resources, State Parks Division	1991
Tourism	Department of Business, Economic Development and Tourism, Hawai‘i Tourism Authority	1991
Transportation	Department of Transportation	1991

Source: Phase I Update Report

Secondly, the State Planning Act requires all four counties to develop long-range general plans. While the Act mandates periodic updates “as needed,” it does not set a specific timeline or prescribe the content of these plans. Counties are expected to align their plans with the state goals outlined in the Act.

CONTEMPORARY PLANNING GOVERNANCE FRAMEWORK IN HAWAI‘I

Over the past 50 years, planning governance in Hawai‘i has diverged from its original structure. Of the thirteen functional plan areas, only housing has been updated in recent years, rendering many functional plans less relevant to contemporary planning issues. In response, state departments have increasingly relied on shorter-term strategic plans focused on specific topics. At the state level, several stand-alone long-range plans now operate parallel to the State Planning Act but outside the original functional plan framework. These plans often address areas less emphasized in the Act, particularly environmental and safety management. For example, in 2021, OPSD published the *2050 Sustainability Plan*. Governed under HRS §226, the same statute as the State Planning Act and updated in 2019, the plan incorporates current topics, including the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (State of Hawai‘i, Office of Planning and Sustainable Development, 2021).

County general plans, while sometimes outdated, have maintained a relatively consistent role. All four counties update their plans approximately every 10–15 years. Although the State Planning Act does not regulate plan content, the general plans consistently address core priorities such as land use, housing, climate, and economic development.

Emerging Themes in the General Plans

Environmental Resilience

Environmental resilience has become increasingly central to planning across the state. County general plans address disaster mitigation, climate change, and natural environment protection. Plans emphasize building infrastructure resilient to natural disasters, establishing effective response mechanisms, and ensuring resource availability. Climate risks are carefully considered when planning land development, and unique ecosystems are prioritized for protection. Given tourism's economic importance, the plans also promote sustainable eco-tourism to preserve natural areas (County of Hawai'i, Planning Department, 2024).

Urban-Rural Divide

County plans consistently emphasize the preservation of rural lands amid ongoing economic development. The Maui and Kauai plans specifically highlight the importance of protecting rural culture. The Maui General Plan reflects residents' desire to "keep the country-country" (County of Maui Planning Department, 2012, pp. 8-10), while Kauai uses urban growth boundaries to safeguard agricultural lands (County of Kaua'i Planning Department, 2018). On Oahu, urban pressure is addressed by encouraging the development of a second urban hub (City and County of Honolulu, Department of Planning and Permitting, 2021).

Research, Innovation, and Data

Recent plans emphasize cross-sector research and innovation. Counties propose policies to foster business innovation and economic growth. Hawai'i County advocates for mixed-use innovation zones to support small businesses (County of Hawai'i, Planning Department, 2024), while Maui County encourages broader industry investment, particularly in technology (County of Maui Planning Department, 2012). The plans also prioritize research on climate change and economic development.

Evolution of Planning Policy Themes and Terminology

Contemporary plans have moved beyond the original five policy areas of the State Planning Act, incorporating updated terminology and priorities. Table 2 summarizes major policy areas and the terminology used across the four county general plans.

Table 2. Thematic Vocabulary across Hawai'i's County General Plans

Policy Area	Terminology
Economy	Economic diversification/diversity Innovation Emerging industries Sustainable economic development Expand local industries/businesses Small business development
Population	Growth Management Directed growth Urban/rural growth

Environment	Sustainability Stewardship Natural resource preservation Ecosystem Climate change resilience Environmental health Hazard mitigation Energy resilience Environmental justice Clean air Clean water
Infrastructure/Transportation	Utility systems Energy systems Public facilities Transportation networks Multi-modal transportation Mobility Infrastructure capacity
Housing/Community	Affordable housing Available housing Workforce housing Complete communities Safe neighborhoods Access to services/amenities
Culture/Heritage	Cultural preservation Heritage Sense of place Traditional knowledge Cultural resources

Source: Compilation from Hawai'i's county general plans

Alignment With Part 1 of Chapter 226 (HRS §226-1, §226-3, §226-4)

A review of Hawai'i's plans indicates that the original purpose of the State Planning Act, as defined under HRS §226-1, remains relevant. However, opportunities exist to improve the efficiency of planning processes, particularly as coordination between state and county governments has weakened since the statute's enactment.

The values outlined in §226-3 and the goals in §226-4 continue to be important, yet contemporary planning frameworks have shifted away from a primarily economic and individualistic focus. Whereas the statutes emphasize economic self-sufficiency and mobility, contemporary plans highlight the relationship between people and the land. Economic priorities, such as innovation and research, remain, but there is now a broader emphasis on sustainability,

encompassing economic, environmental, and cultural dimensions. Contemporary plans focus on balancing development with societal needs rather than prioritizing individual prosperity alone.

PRECEDENTS

The states of Maine, California, and Maryland were selected for this precedent study because they exemplify strong state-level planning governance frameworks that balance statutory authority with effective coordination across substate jurisdictions. According to the American Planning Association, these states demonstrate well-established institutional arrangements, legal mechanisms, and planning practices that allow for both statewide oversight and local flexibility. Each provides a distinct model of state–substate coordination, offering valuable insights for potential updates to the Hawai‘i State Planning Act.

Maine

Maine's Growth Management Act (Title 30-A, chapter 187, subchapter 2) establishes statewide land-use and resource goals but largely relies on voluntary municipal participation, supported by strong legal and incentive levers, to drive local plan-making and plan-implementation. [1]

To obtain a state "finding of consistency," Maine's longstanding Chapter 208 Comprehensive Plan Review Criteria Rule (still in effect while rules are being updated) requires a vision statement, a public participation summary, a regional coordination program, a compliant future land use plan, and topic-area components across 13 required topic areas including water resources, housing, transportation, fiscal capacity, and existing land use.[3]

Municipalities are generally not mandated to prepare a growth management program; the statute states they "may" do so. [4] However, Maine enforces compliance through: (1) plan–ordinance consistency requirements (zoning must be "pursuant to and consistent with" a comprehensive plan), (2) a statutory "sunset" concept for inconsistent ordinances (inconsistent portions become ineffective under specified conditions/timeframes), and (3) substantial state incentives (grant preferences, steering state capital investments toward locally-designated growth areas, and certain delegations/exemptions under other environmental/transport statutes). [5] Maine courts reinforce this framework by reviewing challenges to plan–zoning consistency with deference to the local legislative body, applying a "basic harmony" standard, with the challenger bearing the burden. [6]

Implication for Hawai‘i: Maine's statutory structure is relatively compact. It names a small set of required plan components, while relying on rules and review criteria to define what constitutes a "consistent" plan. Hawai‘i could adopt a similar model by keeping HRS 226 concise and using administrative rules or guidance to define plan content and review criteria, provided the state commits to maintaining those rules over time [22]

Table 3. Summary of statutes and guidance – Maine

Source	What it requires	Enforcement / practical effect
Title 30-A §4326	Growth management program includes a comprehensive plan (subsections 1–4) and implementation program; plan elements include inventory/analysis/needs assessment, policy development, implementation strategy, future land use plan, regional coordination. [19]	Defines what a "comprehensive plan" / "growth management program" must contain for statutory consistency purposes. [18]
Title 30-A §4324	Municipality "may" prepare a growth management program; sets public participation/hearing procedures for adoption and amendment. [4]	Planning is generally voluntary, but procedural compliance matters for plan adoption and for state review outcomes. [70]
Title 30-A §4352(2)	Zoning ordinance must be "pursuant to and consistent with" a comprehensive plan (with limited exception). [71]	A town that wants zoning must align it with a comprehensive plan; inconsistency creates legal vulnerability and can undermine ordinance effect. [72]
Title 30-A §4314	Provides that inconsistent ordinance portions are "no longer in effect" under specified conditions/timeframes. [42]	Statutory "teeth" for plan–ordinance consistency; creates enforceability leverage in litigation/review. [73]
Title 5 §3233	Establishes office review timelines; findings on "procedures, goals and guidelines"; appeal rights; final agency action; 12-year plan finding validity. [54]	Core state review mechanics; consistency findings influence ordinance defensibility and incentives. [74]
Title 5 §3234	Requires state grant/investment preferences for municipalities with certification / consistent plans / consistent zoning. [47]	Major funding incentive lever; encourages plan adoption and ordinance alignment. [68]

Chapter 208 rule	Sets detailed plan content for consistency finding; two-part review; required elements + 13 topic areas; FLUP focus; 12-year validity. [75]	Operates as the effective checklist/standard for "consistency"; shapes plan structure and state review determinations. [76]

California

California law requires every city and county to adopt a comprehensive, long-term general plan, and the statute specifies mandatory "elements" that must be included and internally consistent. The universally required General Plan elements are land use, circulation, housing, conservation, open space, noise, and safety; in addition, some jurisdictions must include or integrate an environmental justice element, and certain San Joaquin Valley jurisdictions must address air quality through specified General Plan amendments.

Enforcement follows a two-track system. Most General Plan compliance is enforced indirectly through vertical-consistency doctrine which requires zoning and many land-use decisions to align with the General Plan, and through litigation, where courts may invalidate inconsistent zoning. The housing element, however, is subject to far more formal state oversight; the California Department of Housing and Community Development reviews drafts and adopted housing elements for "substantial compliance," monitors local actions or inaction that conflict with housing obligations, can refer matters to the Attorney General, and may trigger powerful court-ordered remedies, including monthly fines and potential court-supervised "agent" authority.

State review of the broader General Plan is primarily advisory and reporting-focused. The responsible state office develops and periodically updates guidelines for mandatory elements, and local governments must submit annual General Plan implementation reports. By contrast, state review of the housing element is substantive (a determination of statutory compliance), with clear timelines and major downstream effects on permitting, funding eligibility, and litigation risk.

California also addresses climate change through state-level environmental plans. In 2024, the state proposed the *California Priority Climate Action Plan*, which sets greenhouse gas reduction targets and promotes environmental justice. Earlier, the 2022 *Scoping Plan for Achieving Carbon Neutrality* identified pathways to achieve a carbon-neutral state by 2045.

Implications for Hawai‘i: California illustrates how a state can design a planning framework that is simultaneously local plan-driven and state-priorities enforceable, by combining: (1) a mandatory plan architecture, (2) consistency doctrine, and (3) selective, high-intensity state review where statewide interests are strongest. For Hawai‘i, the comparison-relevant takeaways are:

1. Using a mandatory elements scaffold to standardize local plans while preserving local tailoring. California's statute mandates the element set and tightly specifies some within-element content (e.g., climate adaptation in safety, circulation multimodal standards), while leaving local governments room to define local policies and maps.
2. Achieving real enforceability through consistency doctrine rather than state plan approval. California makes zoning and subdivisions legally dependent on General Plan consistency and authorizes private enforcement, which can create strong compliance pressure without creating a statewide "approval" bureaucracy for every plan update.
3. Targeting state review where statewide impacts justify deeper oversight. California's housing element system shows a "state review + consequences" model: explicit compliance findings, annual reporting, state-maintained noncompliance lists tied to

funding, and litigation remedies. If Hawai‘i wants stronger state-level policymaking and coordination in a limited number of priority areas (e.g., housing supply, hazard resilience), California provides an example of how to build an enforceable system without shifting all planning decisions to the state.

Table 4. Summary of statutes and guidance – California

Statute / guidance	Core requirement	Enforcement / practical effect
Gov. Code §65300	Each city/county "shall adopt" a comprehensive, long-term General Plan. [7]	Creates a mandatory planning duty; failure or defects can be litigated under planning/CEQA frameworks. [9]
Gov. Code §65302	General Plan must include specified elements (land use, circulation, housing, conservation, open space, noise, safety) and other statutory content. [12]	Creates the mandatory architecture for local comprehensive plans; provides the baseline for "consistency" enforcement and plan adequacy disputes. [59]
Gov. Code §65300.5	Elements must be "integrated" and "internally consistent." [8]	Enables legal challenges to internally contradictory plans and reinforces the consistency doctrine. [9]
Gov. Code §65860	Zoning "shall be consistent"; private right of action; zoning must be amended after General Plan amendments (including 180-day processing pathway for certain projects). [21]	Strong, litigable vertical consistency; foundational to enforcement of the General Plan as a controlling policy document. [22]
Gov. Code §66473.5	Subdivision approvals must be consistent with adopted plans. [24]	Extends General Plan consistency enforcement into subdivision mapping approvals. [24]
Gov. Code §65588	Housing element must be revised on the statutory schedule. [25]	Creates a hard update-cycle requirement (unlike the broader General Plan) that triggers compliance and enforcement systems. [27]
Gov. Code §65585	HCD draft/adopted review; substantial compliance findings; authority to review local actions; AG notice; court remedies including fines and court-appointed agent authority. [27]	Core enforcement engine of housing element law; can shape local permitting, provoke litigation outcomes, and impose major penalties. [60]

Gov. Code §65589.11	Monthly list of jurisdictions lacking compliant housing element; list of programs contingent on compliance; meeting/findings pathways. [61]	Operationalizes compliance as an eligibility/status regime, supporting funding consequences and statewide transparency. [36]
Gov. Code §65400	Annual General Plan implementation reporting (including housing progress) to legislative body, LCI, and HCD by April 1; annual public meeting. [53]	Creates continuous monitoring, state visibility, and a recurring public accountability forum—even without "state plan approval." [62]
Gov. Code §65040.2	State office develops/adopts and regularly revises advisory General Plan Guidelines; housing element guidelines are HCD guidelines. [52]	Clarifies state role as "standards and support" for General Plans, but advisory—contrasting with housing element's compliance review. [63]

Maryland
A 2022 survey of land use planning laws by the American Planning Association scored Hawai‘i and Maryland similarly across key criteria.

Table 5. Hawai‘i and Maryland State Planning Laws

	Hawai‘i	Maryland
Strength of State Role	High	High
Emphasis on Hazard Mitigation	Medium	Medium
Emphasis on Climate Action	Medium	Low
Resilience Planning Score	12 / 26 criteria met	12 / 26 criteria met

Source: 2022 Survey of State Planning Laws, APA (2022)

Despite geographic differences, Hawai‘i and Maryland share comparable state planning scope and guidance. Reviewing Maryland’s state planning guidelines, particularly recent or upcoming changes, offers insight into a contemporary state planning doctrine that Hawai‘i could consider for near-term alignment.

Executive summary
Maryland’s statewide planning policy is codified as eight “planning principles” (land, transportation, housing, economy, equity, resilience, place, ecology) that planning commissions must implement through their comprehensive plans [1] Maryland does not operate a centralized “state plan approval” system for local plans; instead, it relies on: (i) mandated local plan elements and recurring plan review cycles, (ii) procedural state and intergovernmental review periods, (iii) targeted subject-matter reviews by state resource agencies for certain plan elements, and (iv) strong issue-specific state levers (notably growth tier mapping tied to septic/subdivision limitations) to shape local outcomes. [2]

Plan content requirements differ by jurisdiction. Non-charter counties and most municipalities follow Land Use Article Title 3, whereas charter counties follow Title 1, Subtitle 4. Certain elements apply conditionally (e.g., mineral resources if geological data are available, fisheries for tidal counties, municipal growth for zoning municipalities) [3]

Enforcement in Maryland is not primarily punitive. The strongest consequences are: (1) time- and process-based constraints (e.g., a 60-day circulation requirement before plan hearings) and (2) substantive constraints that attach to specific state programs—most notably the “growth tiers” / septic subdivision regime where local adoption of tiers is a prerequisite to authorizing certain major subdivisions served by on-site sewage disposal. [4]

Implications for Hawai‘i
Maryland offers a model where statewide priorities are integrated into local comprehensive plans through a small set of high-level statutory principles (now eight planning principles) rather than

through a single statewide "plan certification" gatekeeping mechanism. [1] Key design choices for Hawai'i include whether to embed statewide values as: (i) broad principles/visions implemented through local plans, (ii) mandatory plan elements, or (iii) program-specific statutory levers that impose material permitting consequences when unmet. [47]

Maryland's strongest enforcement signal comes from targeted policy areas, like growth tiers/septic subdivisions, where local planning artifacts (tier maps) are tied to clear legal consequences. [48] For Hawai'i, this suggests that if the State Planning Act is revised to strengthen implementation, the most durable approach may be to identify a limited set of priority statewide issues (e.g., infrastructure capacity, hazard resilience, water resources, housing equity) and attach clear implementation triggers and consequences there, rather than relying solely on general "consistency with state goals" language. [49]

Finally, Maryland's structure illustrates how a state can maintain an advisory review posture while still achieving substantive alignment through (a) mandatory intergovernmental circulation/review windows and (b) state-agency consistency reviews for technical elements (water/resources, sensitive areas, minerals). [50] This is a potential middle path for Hawai'i if policymakers want stronger state coordination without creating an administratively heavy statewide approval regime.

Table 6. Summary of statutes and guidance – Maryland

Statute / official guidance	Core requirement	Enforcement / practical effect
Land Use §1-201	Planning commissions must implement eight state planning principles through comprehensive plans. [1]	Establishes statewide policy expectations that shape plan review comments and plan structuring. [42]
Land Use §3-102	Sets required plan elements for Title 3 jurisdictions plus conditional and optional elements. [10]	Defines minimum content baseline; used as checklist in state review letters. [42]
Land Use §1-406	Sets required plan elements for charter counties plus conditional mineral resources and optional preservation element. [16]	Different element baseline by jurisdiction type; influences what state reviewers check. [51]
Land Use §3-204	Each local jurisdiction must adopt a plan with required elements; links regulation-making to having an adopted plan. [23]	Creates a legal prerequisite for adopting implementing regulations and strengthens litigation defensibility. [52]
Land Use §3-301 and §1-416	Plan review/update "at least once every 10 years." [24]	Ongoing compliance obligation; frequently treated as the standard update cycle. [53]
Land Use §3-203(c)	Mandatory 60-day circulation of proposed plans/amendments to adjoining jurisdictions and responsible state units. [25]	Procedural enforcement lever: insufficient lead time can force hearing rescheduling; ensures state input into record. [54]
Land Use §3-303	Local jurisdiction must ensure implementation via zoning/subdivision/other ordinances consistent with the plan. [28]	Creates plan–regulation linkage and a statutory "consistency" hook for implementation tools. [55]
Land Use §3-104 / §3-106 / §3-107	State environmental/natural resource agencies review sensitive areas, water resources, and mineral	Targeted substantive state review; primarily advisory but record-relevant and program-alignment oriented. [46]

	resources elements for program/goals consistency. [56]	
Environment §9-206 (as applied in case law) + Growth tiers framework	Limits septic-served major subdivisions unless growth tiers are adopted; tier classifications affect development potential. [57]	Strong programmatic consequence: constrains subdivision approvals when tiers/plans not completed. [58]
State plan review practice (MDP review letters)	State planning agency issues advisory comments; circulates drafts to other agencies; requests inclusion in hearing record. [42]	Demonstrates advisory (not approving) state role combined with multi-agency coordination. [43]

Alignment With Part 1 of Chapter 226 (HRS §226-1, §226-3, §226-4)
The planning frameworks in California, Maine, and Maryland reflect many of the same core principles embodied in Hawai‘i’s State Planning Act. HRS §226-1 establishes the purpose of statewide planning as improving coordination among government actions, guiding development, and ensuring the wise use of Hawai‘i’s resources. Sections §226-3 and §226-4 further articulate statewide goals and policy objectives across areas such as land use, economic activity, housing, transportation, environmental protection, and public infrastructure. Each of the examined states incorporates similar concepts, though through distinct institutional structures.

California most closely mirrors the comprehensive vision of Chapter 226. Its General Plan system requires every city and county to adopt a long-term plan covering core elements such as land use, housing, circulation, conservation, open space, and safety. The doctrine of internal and vertical consistency, requiring zoning and land-use decisions to conform to the General Plan, creates a strong link between statewide policy priorities and local implementation. This structure parallels the intent of §226-1 to guide coordinated development and aligns with §226-3 and §226-4 by embedding environmental protection, housing provision, transportation planning, and resource conservation within mandatory planning elements.

Maine’s Growth Management Act reflects the goals of Chapter 226 through a statewide policy framework paired with local implementation incentives. The state establishes broad land-use and resource management goals that local comprehensive plans must address in order to receive a “finding of consistency.” Although municipalities are not strictly required to prepare plans, incentives, such as grant eligibility and state investment alignment, encourage participation. This model aligns with Hawai‘i’s planning goals by emphasizing coordinated development, protection of natural resources, and alignment between local plans and statewide objectives, though it relies more heavily on voluntary participation than Hawai‘i’s policy framework suggests.

Maryland’s planning framework aligns with Chapter 226 through its statutory “planning principles,” which guide local comprehensive planning around themes such as sustainable land use, transportation efficiency, environmental stewardship, economic development, and equitable communities. While Maryland does not maintain a single statewide approval process for local plans, the state shapes outcomes through required plan elements, periodic review cycles, and targeted regulatory tools such as growth-tier mapping tied to infrastructure and subdivision approvals. This approach echoes the policy objectives in §226-3 and §226-4 by linking land-use planning with environmental protection, infrastructure planning, and sustainable growth management.

Overall, these frameworks demonstrate different mechanisms for operationalizing statewide planning goals. California emphasizes strong legal consistency between plans and implementation, Maine uses incentive-based alignment with statewide goals, and Maryland relies on guiding principles combined with targeted regulatory levers. Each model offers insights for Hawai‘i in balancing statewide coordination with local planning autonomy.

Convergence vs. differences (high level):

- All three comparison frameworks explicitly center housing, transportation, water resources, and natural resources/open space as major planning themes.

- Energy, education, historic preservation, and tourism stand out as Hawai‘i-specific “major functional plan” themes; they are not standalone major planning themes in the comparator statutes/guidelines.

STAKEHOLDER INTERVIEWS

A key component of Phase II of the State Planning Act update is conducting stakeholder interviews. The objective of these interviews is to capture perspectives from diverse sectors and islands on the current State Planning Act, including what stakeholders value, what they believe should change, and what new elements may be needed to align with Hawai‘i’s evolving policy and planning landscape.

Stakeholder Profile Summary

To assess the continued relevance of Part I of the Hawai‘i State Planning Act, semi-structured interviews are being conducted with stakeholders representing a range of public, private, and nonprofit/community perspectives. These interviews aim to gather insights on contemporary planning priorities, challenges, and opportunities related to the purpose, goals, and objectives codified in Chapter 226, Part I. As of January–March 2026, a total of 16 interviews have been completed, including eight with public-sector stakeholders and eight with nonprofit/community representatives.

Public Sector Stakeholders

Public sector participants included representatives from state and county departments responsible for planning, resource management, and policy implementation. Interviews focused on departmental planning efforts, alignment with the Hawai‘i State Plan, interagency coordination, and community engagement.

Overall, public sector stakeholders provided insights into how state planning is operationalized at the departmental level, highlighting successes, constraints, and opportunities to strengthen alignment with statutory objectives.

Nonprofit/Community Stakeholders

Community and nonprofit participants represented organizations serving place-based communities across Hawai‘i, including advocacy, environmental, and social service groups. Interviews explored their engagement with state planning processes, perspectives on the Hawai‘i State Plan and Act, and priorities for long-term community development.

These stakeholders offered important perspectives on translating statewide planning objectives into actionable, place-based strategies, highlighting both alignment and gaps between statutory goals and on-the-ground realities.

Private Sector Stakeholders

(To be interviewed)

Table 8. Key topics explored in stakeholder interviews

Key Topic	Public Sector	Community/Nonprofit Sector	Private Sector*	Mapping to HRS Chapter 226 Part I
Organizational context and planning role	Department plans, planning cycles, responsible offices	Mission, communities served, engagement with planning processes	Role of businesses in development and planning	§226-1 (purpose of statewide planning framework and coordination of planning activities)
Use and relevance of the Hawai‘i State Plan / State Planning Act	How the State Plan informs agency decisions and projects	How the Act influences organizational work and advocacy	How state planning affects investment, regulation, and development decisions	§226-1 (purpose and role of state plan) and §226-4 (framework of statewide goals)
Principles or values	Agency guiding values or principles for planning	Organizational values and desired statewide principles	Business values (economic vitality, predictability, sustainability)	§226-3 (core principles or values: self-sufficiency, social/economic mobility, community well-being)
Opportunities for improvement	Balancing agency priorities with statewide goals	Alignment/misalignment between statewide goals and community needs	Alignment between statewide goals and private investment strategies	§226-4 (statewide goals and objectives guiding policy alignment)
Collaboration and support	Coordination across federal, state, and county agencies	Collaboration between government and community organizations	Public–private partnerships and regulatory coordination	§226-1 (purpose includes improving coordination among agencies

Community engagement	How agencies gather public input and who participates	How organizations gather community input and represent underserved groups	Community engagement related to development or industry activity	§226-3 (civic participation, social responsibility, and community well-being)
Data and information systems	Data used to monitor plans, data sharing between agencies	Tools, resources, and data needed for community planning	Data needed for economic forecasting, infrastructure, and investment	§226-1 (supporting informed decision-making and coordinated planning)
Emerging issues and future needs	Long-term challenges facing agencies	Long-term community needs	Future economic and industry trends	§226-4 (long-term statewide planning goals population, economy, environment, etc.)
Updating the State Plan / State Planning Act	Improvements to make the Plan more actionable for agencies	Priorities for updating the Act	Regulatory clarity and modernization	§226-1 and §226-4 (ensuring the plan remains a guiding framework for statewide goals)
Capacity and implementation	Translating planning guidance into actionable strategies	Capacity for communities and agencies to engage in planning	Capacity for private sector participation	§226-1 (implementation of coordinated planning system)
Phase 2 engagement (State Plan update process)	Ensuring agencies participate effectively	Meaningful community engagement, avoiding consultation fatigue	Future engagement with business stakeholders	§226-3 (emphasis on participation and cooperative decision-making)

*Interviews with private sector stakeholders have not been completed.

Findings and Alignment with Part 1 of Chapter 226 (HRS §226-1, §226-3, §226-4)
The stakeholder interviews reveal a nuanced picture of how Part I of Chapter 226 aligns with contemporary planning priorities. Overall, the Act's foundational goals, coordination principles, and citizen participation provisions remain broadly relevant, but stakeholders identified areas where an update could enhance effectiveness and responsiveness. Below is a summary of stakeholders' perspectives on each of the key topics mentioned in Table 1.

Public Sector Stakeholder Perspectives
Interviews with state agencies provide insight into how the provisions of Part I of the Hawai'i Revised Statutes Chapter 226, particularly §226-1, §226-3, and §226-4, are reflected in contemporary state planning practice. Overall, agencies continue to rely on a range of planning tools and statutory mandates that align broadly with the State Planning Act's goals of coordinated, long-term planning. However, stakeholders noted that the Act often functions as a high-level reference rather than a practical framework guiding day-to-day planning decisions.

Organizational context and planning role

- state agencies operate within a diverse planning landscape shaped by statutory mandates, programmatic responsibilities, and evolving policy priorities; many departments maintain long-standing functional plans aligned with their core missions, such as housing, transportation, or environmental management, while also developing shorter-term strategic plans to better align resources with emerging stakeholder and operational needs.

- several agencies are adopting more flexible planning approaches to respond to rapidly changing economic and regulatory conditions; annual or periodic plan updates are increasingly used to address variables such as interest rate fluctuations, construction cost changes, and shifting policy priorities; adaptive approaches reflect the challenge of implementing long-term statewide goals within a dynamic economic environment.

- new legislative mandates are also increasing planning complexity; emerging policy requirements related to greenhouse gas reduction, climate adaptation, and infrastructure resilience require agencies to integrate new objectives into existing planning frameworks; these mandates advance statewide priorities but they can also create administrative and resource pressures when multiple requirements must be implemented concurrently.

- county planning efforts are primarily guided by general plans, which influence zoning codes, subdivision regulations, and community development strategies tailored to local conditions; these plans are typically adopted by ordinance and generally align with broader state planning frameworks.

- county initiatives commonly include multimodal transportation strategies, village design guidelines to preserve community character, and recovery planning for hazard events; additional planning efforts focus on conservation, recreation, climate adaptation, housing, and public safety, reflecting an expanded scope that incorporates issues such as climate change, sea level rise, age-friendly communities, cultural preservation, and infrastructure resilience; counties frequently rely on technical experts and consultants to support specialized planning projects.

- plan updates typically follow 10-year cycles for general and community development plans, though actual update timelines are often longer due to funding limitations, staffing shortages, and administrative capacity constraints; some plans, such as hazard mitigation plans, require more frequent updates to comply with federal requirements; workforce challenges, including competitive compensation constraints and recruitment difficulties, further affect update schedules.

- updates generally involve both internal staff and external consultants and require coordination across multiple departments and agencies.

- recent plan revisions increasingly address topics such as climate adaptation, tourism impacts, military land use considerations, and integration of traditional cultural knowledge; zoning regulations are updated more frequently through incremental amendments rather than comprehensive rewrites.

- overall, agencies and counties continue working to balance procedural requirements, evolving community priorities, and limited organizational capacity.

Use and relevance of the Hawai'i State Plan

- factors that limit its direct influence: parts of the Plan are viewed as outdated, reflecting planning assumptions, policy classifications, and land use references (such as historical agricultural uses) developed decades ago; the Plan's broad goals can be difficult to translate into actionable strategies within agency programs.

  "This should be a reflection of, partly, what we [counties] have been doing all this time, versus it's like this has its own life and we have our own life and we don't [connect]."

  "Yes, we are aware of the plan. And I will say that typically when I… take a plan through the public hearing planning commission process… I do refer to the State Planning Act to kind of show like, Okay, we have this state plan in place, and it indicates that general plans should do A, B and C, and our plan does this. So I will say that I use it that way. But other than that, we don't refer to the State Planning Act too much."

  "I guess the reason why I would look towards the State Plan is to make sure… are we in alignment with where the state wants to go? but I guess, because I know that plan hasn't been updated, then why am I looking for that plan…"

- agencies tend to rely more heavily on sector-specific plans, county plans, and federal regulatory frameworks to guide implementation; for example, transportation planning is strongly shaped by federal requirements and funding programs, which help define processes and priorities for statewide transportation systems.

- the Plan's overarching objectives, such as supporting economic development, environmental stewardship, and community well-being, remain consistent with their missions.

- the Plan is occasionally referenced during permit reviews, zoning decisions, and public hearings, but it is not actively integrated into most departments' routine workflows; some staff members were unfamiliar with the Plan's full scope or intended role, suggesting limited integration into standard planning and decision-making processes.

  "A lot of the criteria that we have for some of our discretionary permits says is it in conformance to the Hawai'i State Plan or Planning Act. So I think there… sometimes it's difficult to find you know exactly where that is…"

- the Plan provides limited guidance on pressing issues such as climate resilience, aging populations, energy transitions, and disaster preparedness, reducing its value as a forward-looking policy document.

- the current structure can add unnecessary or conflicting layers to the planning process; the state's role should focus on supporting and coordinating with county plans rather than creating parallel policy tracks that complicate implementation.

  "The HRS requirement for the clean greenhouse gas reporting requires accounting… and then it actually excludes aviation emission coming to Hawai'i… in other section… it requires us to have a zero transportation emission… So those are two different planning mandates that we have… there are inconsistencies there."

- uncertainty about the Plan's enforceability; inconsistent terminology, particularly the distinction between "objectives" and "policies," which can create confusion across agencies; updating the Plan without addressing these legal and definitional issues could create compliance risks.

- departments face staffing shortages and limited capacity for strategic planning work; need for additional training and internal guidance on how and when to use the Plan; improved onboarding and professional development could support better integration into planning processes.

Collaboration and support

- strengthening coordination among government agencies; existing councils, advisory groups, and cross-department initiatives provide opportunities for collaboration but current coordination practices are largely informal and dependent on individual relationships or project champions; therefore, collaboration can vary significantly across policy areas and initiatives.

- major planning challenges, including climate mitigation, infrastructure investment, and natural resource management require coordinated action across multiple agencies; however, planning responsibilities are often distributed across departments with different mandates, funding streams, and implementation timelines; fragmentation can make it difficult to align policies and programs effectively, particularly when projects involve overlapping jurisdictions or complex regulatory requirements.

- strategies that have helped support collaboration: regular interagency meetings, advisory committees, and cross-sector initiatives, such as the Hawai‘i One Water Initiative and transit-oriented development programs led by the Hawai‘i‘ Housing Finance and Development Corporation, offer examples of efforts that bring multiple stakeholders together around shared planning goals; some agencies have also experimented with innovative approaches, such as embedding planning staff within other departments or holding joint public workshops to coordinate outreach and policy discussions.

- collaboration can be hindered by institutional silos and unclear responsibilities; in areas such as shoreline management, wastewater infrastructure, and natural resource protection, overlapping mandates sometimes create uncertainty regarding agency roles; certain agencies, such as the Hawai‘i Department of Health, are not always consistently represented in planning discussions, particularly in rural or regional planning initiatives.

- operational factors can further complicate coordination; frequent staff turnover, combined with limited staffing capacity, can disrupt communication and reduce continuity across projects; reliance on outdated communication systems or inconsistent data-sharing platforms can make collaboration less efficient and more difficult to sustain over time.

- strong interest in establishing more formal coordination frameworks to support cross-agency collaboration such as regularized interagency planning meetings, clearer delineation of roles and responsibilities, and shared planning tools or data platforms that allow agencies to track projects and priorities collectively.

- emergency events also highlight the importance of effective coordination; disasters such as wildfires can expose weaknesses in existing collaboration systems, as agencies must respond rapidly under high-pressure conditions; emergency response efforts often mobilize quickly but a lack of alignment across agencies can create confusion or competing priorities during recovery and rebuilding efforts.

- heavy workloads and limited staffing frequently constrain agencies' ability to participate in sustained coordination efforts; even when collaboration is recognized as a priority, operational demands can limit the time available for interagency planning activities; new legislative mandates and coordination requirements may further strain agency capacity when roles and expectations are not clearly defined.

  "When I think of implementation… funding is a big thing and priorities. So what may be important to [one agency] might not be a priority for [another], for example."

Opportunities for improvement

- the State Planning Act should focus on strengthening clarity and coordination rather than simply adding new requirements; because the Act is intended to provide long-term policy direction, excessive detail could reduce flexibility and increase administrative burden.

- overlapping or conflicting regulatory requirements across policy areas; in transportation planning, for example, some regulatory provisions may inadvertently conflict with broader statewide planning objectives.

  "When it comes to implementation, there's no way to reconcile differences... The plan doesn't say, how do you resolve that? Someone could find probably a number of those objectives that support that project, they could probably find also a number of objectives that are opposed to the project. And how do you reconcile that?"

- better alignment across statutory mandates, planning processes, and funding mechanisms would strengthen the state's ability to implement long-term goals.

- several areas requiring clearer guidance: responsibility for implementing plan changes; the purpose and scope of any task force or update effort; update frequency; whether revisions will constitute a comprehensive overhaul or a targeted review.

- clearer direction on how counties and agencies should apply the State Plan in practice, with suggestions for annual training programs and inter-county learning exchanges.

  "We don't need another layer. I mean, I don't want it to I don't want to make it extra complicated, is my point. I ... think there's a role for the state to play. And in Oregon, it's it's not like that. It is proactive, and that when they finish a community plan or comprehensive plan, that plan goes to the state and they review it and they say, Yep, you're in compliance. This is good go. That is the role I see the state playing in a much more logical way for me, either be the thing that people go to and say, [county] didn't do this right, or just be like, yeah, [county] did this right, or they didn't do it right. You gotta fix this."

- the state should establish clearer goals that counties must incorporate into general and community plans, similar to approaches used in other states; preserve local autonomy, particularly in areas such as wildfire response, shoreline management, and housing, where local knowledge is critical for effective implementation.

- the State Plan should better reflect contemporary priorities, including climate change and resilience planning, housing affordability, wildfire risk, shoreline erosion, and stronger environmental protections for critical areas.

Community engagement

- stakeholder engagement is essential but also complex and resource-intensive, given competing preferences between maintaining existing systems and pursuing more ambitious reforms.

- range of outreach methods, including public meetings, workshops, online engagement platforms, and consultant-supported facilitation, to broaden participation and gather public input; established formal engagement frameworks, including the preparation of

Community Engagement Plans and the use of advisory committees and stakeholder working groups.

- strengthening community engagement will require improved coordination, greater institutional capacity, and clearer communication about how public input influences planning decisions; expanding the use of diverse engagement tools, while maintaining accessible in-person opportunities, may help reach a wider range of participants; more sustained engagement throughout project implementation, rather than one-time consultation, is an important opportunity to build trust and ensure that community perspectives are meaningfully reflected in planning outcomes.

- recommended engagement strategies: virtual platforms such as Zoom to expand access, conducting interviews with counties, legislators, nonprofits, and agencies, and managing outreach fatigue through transparent and intentional engagement design; it is important to include youth and underrepresented communities in the planning process.

- barriers to meaningful engagement: limited number of highly active participants, while groups such as young families, renters, non-English speakers, and youth are less consistently represented; some communities also experience engagement fatigue due to repeated consultation processes; limited staffing capacity and high turnover among planning professionals can constrain agencies' ability to maintain sustained outreach and follow-through on community feedback.

  "We move at the speed of trust with the community. We can't, unless that community is ready to move forward… or to want to engage with us, then we don't go ahead… if we haven't earned their trust, then we're just wasting our time. I think it's time and staff resources. Basically that's the challenge. Because if we had more time, I feel like we could totally do a better job… everything is always so condensed, like, it's so much pressure."

  "Just a lot of the people who still attend our workshops are, you know, they're retired, they own a house, they might not be part of that group of people that are struggling to survive, or who could really use a bike lane to get to work or an apartment to have a starter home… I think that a lot of our workshops would really be improved… if we had that voice."

  "One thing that has happened is we are getting a lot of the same folks coming out with the same testimony over and over again, and it seems like it's making it challenging for other voices to come in, because they're kind of driving force. They're a little bit intimidating and forceful in their language, which then folks don't want to come to those meetings and engage.

Data and information systems

- reliable and accessible data for effective planning and decision-making is important.

"It would be good if there was one place that had all the city data [on affordable housing]. I know there's various efforts to do that, but I haven't seen one that really gets you the answers you need."

- State agencies rely on a variety of operational, regulatory, and reporting datasets, including demographic, economic, and environmental indicators, to guide program implementation and monitor progress; many of these data sources originate from entities such as the Hawai'i's Department of Business, Economic Development and Tourism and the U.S. Census Bureau's American Community Survey. Geographic information systems (GIS) and other digital platforms are commonly used to visualize and share data, supporting coordination across departments and enabling spatial analysis for planning purposes.

- inconsistencies in data accessibility and interoperability across agencies – while some information is publicly available, formal systems for interagency data sharing remain limited; in many cases, collaboration occurs through informal networks, memoranda of understanding, or direct staff contacts; disconnected systems, inconsistent data updates, and varying access policies can hinder integrated analysis, particularly for projects that span multiple departments or islands.

- planning efforts are sometimes constrained by outdated, incomplete, or low-resolution data, especially in rural communities and smaller jurisdictions; gaps exist in areas such as land use information, rainfall and watershed data, infrastructure inventories, and affordable housing statistics; in some instances, departments continue to rely on paper-based records or fragmented digital systems, limiting analytical capacity and slowing planning processes.

- broad interest among agencies in modernizing data infrastructure to improve efficiency and transparency; potential value of centralized digital platforms, such as shared dashboards or integrated databases, to track plan implementation, monitor infrastructure conditions, and ensure compliance with development requirements; current data management practices often rely on decentralized tools such as shared drives and email communication, which can create inefficiencies and reduce visibility across agencies.

- new legislative mandates sometimes require agencies to administer programs outside their traditional areas of expertise; when these responsibilities are introduced without corresponding data systems or technical guidance, agencies may face administrative challenges that complicate implementation.

- institutional capacity also influences the effectiveness of data systems; staffing shortages, turnover, and limited compensation in planning departments can affect data continuity and institutional knowledge; these constraints, combined with uneven public engagement across demographic groups, can limit the range of perspectives reflected in planning datasets.

Emerging issues and future needs
Stakeholders identified several emerging issues that are likely to shape statewide planning priorities over the next 10–20 years.

- increasing recognition that long-term planning must account for greater uncertainty related to climate impacts, technological change, infrastructure resilience, and evolving development patterns.

  "The biggest unknown is… the pace of the change… I'll just give you an example… all this travel forecasting models were developed… and were pretty good… and then, within the last 10 years, with the ride-hailing and different mobility options, some of those models don't work anymore."

- growing use of scenario planning to evaluate alternative futures – agencies are examining a range of possible conditions, including continued development under current patterns, accelerated shifts toward low-emission transportation systems, and more frequent environmental disruptions associated with climate change; approaches are intended to complement traditional forecasting tools and support more flexible decision-making.

- conventional planning models, particularly travel demand forecasting tools, may be less reliable in a period of rapid behavioral and technological change; as mobility systems, land use patterns, and economic conditions evolve, agencies are increasingly exploring new analytical approaches while recognizing the limitations of existing modeling frameworks.

- climate change and environmental hazards pose major planning challenges; impacts such as sea level rise, shoreline erosion, and increased wildfire risk pose significant threats to infrastructure, communities, and natural resources across the state.

- outdated hazard data, including limitations in current flood mapping produced by the Federal Emergency Management Agency; improving hazard mapping, updating regulatory frameworks, and strengthening risk assessments are important steps for improving long-term planning and risk management.

- water availability and watershed protection are critical constraints on future development; the interconnected nature of housing growth, infrastructure capacity, water resources, and climate resilience underscores the need for more coordinated planning strategies across agencies and sectors.

- institutional capacity challenges may further complicate these efforts – persistent staffing shortages within planning agencies, as well as difficulties recruiting and retaining qualified personnel; some jurisdictions have experienced declining interest in serving on planning commissions due to increased public scrutiny and workload demands.

- opportunities to leverage emerging technologies to improve planning processes – tools such as artificial intelligence (AI), advanced data analytics, and virtual reality (VR) could

enhance scenario modeling, improve hazard prediction, and support more interactive forms of public engagement; for example, VR technologies integrated with drone imagery may help visualize development scenarios, evaluate design impacts, and support the preservation of historic sites; although adoption has been gradual, participants viewed these technologies as promising tools for improving both planning efficiency and public understanding of complex issues.

Nonprofit/Community Stakeholder Perspectives

Use and relevance of the Hawai'i State Plan

Stakeholders described a range of ways that community and nonprofit organizations engage with state and county planning processes, often serving as intermediaries between communities and government agencies. Participants highlighted the following:

- the importance of public participation, transparency, and clearer communication between the state and community-based organizations.

- concern that the State Planning Act and related planning frameworks have not kept pace with contemporary challenges; while the Act establishes broad statewide goals, its provisions could be updated to better address emerging priorities such as food security, environmental stewardship, and long-term economic sustainability.

- the importance of strengthening connections between planning goals and implementation

  "The planning process gets hamstrung when everybody's accommodated… If we're going to create a plan, the plan has to explicitly state what actions shall be taken to implement the plan… It was not really an agenda for the future."

- the importance of expanding the state's economic vision beyond traditional sectors while strengthening workforce development and local economic opportunities.

Principles or values

Across interviews, stakeholders stated that the core principles reflected in HRS §226-3, including community well-being, opportunity, and social responsibility, remain highly relevant. However, many participants suggested that these principles could be clarified or expanded to better reflect current social, environmental, and economic priorities. Participants highlighted the following:

- the importance of protecting land and water resources, ensuring long-term food security, and supporting sustainable resource management; many also highlighted the importance of recognizing Native Hawaiian cultural knowledge and values within statewide planning frameworks

- resilience as a guiding value for future planning; the importance of infrastructure, governance systems, and communication networks that support communities during emergencies and enable long-term recovery.

- the need for planning frameworks that translate high-level goals into actionable strategies addressing housing shortages, workforce development, and economic resilience.

- planning processes should prioritize community voice and local knowledge, ensuring that statewide initiatives support rather than override local planning efforts.

- transparency in government decision-making and improved access to public data as important elements of accountable governance.

Opportunities for improvement
While stakeholders broadly supported the goals articulated in HRS §226-4, many noted that gaps between planning goals and implementation limit their effectiveness. A recurring concern was misalignment between statewide planning goals and local community priorities, particularly in areas such as land use and housing policy. Stakeholders suggested that strengthening transparency and communication in planning processes could help address these gaps. Participants highlighted the following:

- the State Planning Act is outdated and lacks "teeth," yet has major potential. It is overly broad and weakly enforceable, allowing projects to cherry-pick favorable policies and claim compliance without accountability.

  "…the State Planning Act is so broadly worded that it's easy to comply with because you can, you can just pick and choose out of the grab bag which policy you want to say you're consistent with, even if you're consistent inconsistent with others, so it's easy to comply with, and there isn't a whole lot of case law indicating that there's any teeth to it, like enforceability or accountability if a project isn't in compliance."

- it could become relevant if "it's shorter, it's more focused on a clear set of priorities, is focused on priorities that would help any industry, and not just one… and that it has some kind of teeth, so that agencies and departments actually, in some way must follow it…"

- an implementation gap and lack of ownership around the State Planning Act – it is unclear who is responsible for implementing the Planning Act and how its policies actually manifest in decisions.

  "I've never once heard… the Planning Act… referenced by the boards and commissions that I've been monitoring… it's like no one knows it exists."

  "Who is responsible for it and what is the purpose at this point in time? It's a huge ask. We see a lot of potential, but if no one's going to actually staff it and see things through, what's the point?"

- designing updates to the State Planning Act with implementation capacity in mind; smaller organizations and communities, particularly those in rural areas, may face challenges in participating in planning processes without adequate resources or technical support.

- the need for stronger coordination across agencies to support data sharing, improve monitoring of policy outcomes, and enable more evidence-based decision-making.

Collaboration and support
A consistent theme across interviews was the need for stronger collaboration among state agencies, community organizations, and residents. Many stakeholders described planning processes as fragmented, with limited coordination across agencies or sectors. Participants highlighted the following:

- the importance of involving relevant agencies and stakeholders earlier in the planning process to avoid delays and improve policy alignment.

- resource constraints as a barrier to effective collaboration; both government agencies and nonprofit organizations often face staffing limitations that can make sustained engagement difficult; dedicating resources to support collaboration and community participation could significantly improve planning outcomes.

- modernizing data systems and improving transparency while balancing privacy considerations; digital tools and technology offer opportunities to improve communication, coordination, and information sharing across agencies and organizations.

- building trust, transparency, and long-term partnerships is essential for effective governance and planning.

Community engagement
Community engagement emerged as a central theme across interviews, consistent with the emphasis on civic participation in HRS §226-3. Participants described the following:

- strategies for gathering public input: community meetings, surveys, collaborative forums, and partnerships with community organizations; these approaches allow nonprofit organizations to serve as bridges between residents and government agencies.

- barriers to effective engagement: difficulties reaching certain populations; limited time and resources for participation; capacity constraints (overloaded agencies, over-tasked participants) limit meaningful engagement, and distrust of government institutions in some communities.
  "It's been a very extractive process… people feel like they're forced to participate because otherwise bad things may happen, versus wanting to participate because they feel like their input and time is being valued…"

- designing engagement processes that are accessible, meaningful, and responsive to community input; the value of compensating community members for their time and expertise, particularly when participation requires sustained involvement.

> "A lot of community members with the most lived experience… they're not going to engage in a way that requires, like writing a really well drafted letter. They have stories to share orally, and they need to be able to talk to someone that they can trust at a time that works for them. And I think that in government processes [it's] not really set up for that type of participation."

- effective planning and engagement in Hawai'i require: community navigators who already have trust and know how to reach people; training for state staff in outreach, environmental justice practices, and culturally competent engagement; a genuine investment in relationship-building and trust-building as core, not peripheral, work; clear communication about how public input will influence planning decisions.

Emerging issues and future needs
Looking ahead, stakeholders identified several emerging issues that should shape future updates to the State Planning Act. One key priority is equitable access to water and sustainable resource management, particularly in light of climate change and increasing pressure on Hawai'i's natural resources. Participants also emphasized the following:

- incorporating Native Hawaiian cultural knowledge and community-based perspectives into long-term planning.

- advances in technology and data analytics present both opportunities and challenges for planning – establishing stronger data governance structures to support responsible data sharing and emerging technologies such as artificial intelligence.

  > "Right now… there is no coherent why for data, like, why data matters, what we need and why, what it would do, what would it look like to do better? And I think the state needs to be able to make a commitment to it…"

- the State Planning Act could benefit from becoming more implementation-oriented, with clearer priorities, measurable outcomes, and practical tools to support agencies and communities.

- the need to strengthen economic diversification, workforce development, housing stability, and social infrastructure such as childcare. Developing clearer indicators to track progress toward social and economic goals was identified as an important step toward more inclusive and responsive planning.

Private Sector Stakeholder Perspectives
(interviews to be scheduled)

POLICY AREAS AND FRAMEWORK

This section of the report examines the continued relevance of the five policy areas of the Hawai'i State Plan – population, economy, facility systems, physical environment, and socio-cultural advancement – in light of the study's findings. The preliminary findings draw on multiple sources of information, including stakeholder interviews, a review of existing statewide

planning documents such as updated functional plans and the Hawai‘i 2050 Sustainability Plan, the Phase I report, and an examination of planning frameworks used in other states, including Maine, Maryland, and California. These sources provide context for understanding how the State Plan's policy areas relate to contemporary planning priorities and practices. Overall, the findings indicate that the existing framework continues to reflect many of the core dimensions of statewide planning, while also highlighting how planning priorities and policy contexts have evolved since the State Plan was last comprehensively updated.

Preliminary takeaways about how the State Plan's objectives relate to contemporary planning priorities, emerging challenges, and opportunities for strengthened coordination and implementation are presented below.

Maintain the overall structure but update the scope of each policy area
Stakeholder interviews suggest that the existing policy areas – population, economy, facility systems, physical environment, and socio-cultural advancement – still capture the major dimensions of statewide planning. Many of the issues raised by stakeholders fall naturally within these categories. However, the policy context has evolved significantly since the Plan was last revised in 1986. Revisiting the policy areas should therefore focus on:

- expanding the policy areas and updating policy priorities within each area
- clarifying how the objectives relate to current statewide challenges
- ensuring the framework reflects contemporary planning practice

This approach would preserve the Plan's familiar structure while improving its relevance and usability.

Strengthen integration across policy areas
A recurring theme in the interviews was that many planning challenges are cross-sectoral. Issues such as housing affordability, water availability, infrastructure investment, and climate resilience involve multiple policy areas simultaneously. Revisiting the policy areas could consider:

- explicitly recognizing interdependencies between population, infrastructure, and environmental systems
- strengthening links between economic development and workforce planning
- integrating environmental resilience with infrastructure and land-use planning

Improved integration could reduce fragmentation and support more coordinated decision-making across agencies.

Reflect emerging planning priorities
Several priorities raised by stakeholders and seen in updated plans are only partially reflected in the existing framework. Revisiting the policy areas should consider incorporating themes that have become central to planning over the past several decades. Key emerging priorities include:

- climate change adaptation and resilience
- wildfire risk and hazard mitigation
- sea level rise and shoreline management
- water security and watershed protection
- housing affordability and social infrastructure
- economic diversification and workforce development
- equity and inclusion in planning processes

These issues generally align with the existing policy areas but may require more explicit recognition and updated policy language.

Address data, technology, and evidence-based planning
Stakeholders consistently emphasized the importance of modern data systems and analytical tools for planning and decision-making. The current policy areas do not explicitly address these topics. A review of the policy areas could consider:

- recognizing the role of data systems and information sharing in statewide planning
- encouraging integrated data platforms and geographic information systems
- supporting scenario planning and emerging technologies, such as advanced modeling tools

Strengthening the role of data and evidence could improve the State Plan's capacity to guide decision-making and track progress.

Strengthen links between objectives and implementation
A major concern expressed by both public-sector and community stakeholders was the gap between the State Plan's high-level goals and practical implementation. Revisiting the policy areas could include:

- clarifying how objectives should be applied in agency and county planning processes
- establishing measurable indicators or benchmarks where appropriate
- improving alignment between statewide objectives, functional plans, and county plans

Strengthening these connections could help ensure that the policy areas serve not only as guiding principles but also as tools that inform planning and policy decisions.

Reinforce the role of community engagement and cultural knowledge
Stakeholders emphasized that effective planning in Hawai'i requires meaningful community participation and recognition of cultural knowledge systems. Revisiting the policy areas could consider:

- strengthening language related to community engagement and civic participation
- incorporating Native Hawaiian cultural perspectives and traditional knowledge
- supporting inclusive engagement processes that reach underrepresented communities

These considerations would reinforce the socio-cultural advancement policy area while strengthening the broader planning framework.

CONCLUSION

Hawai'i's State Planning Act (HRS Chapter 226) continues to provide a relevant foundation for statewide planning, with its emphasis on coordinated development, resource stewardship, and economic goals. However, contemporary planning priorities, such as sustainability, climate resilience, cultural stewardship, and cross-sector integration, highlight opportunities to modernize the framework. Lessons from California, Maine, and Maryland illustrate multiple approaches to aligning statewide objectives with local implementation, from strong legal consistency to incentive-based coordination and principle-driven guidance.

The five policy areas of the State Plan – population, economy, facility systems, physical environment, and socio-cultural advancement – remain appropriate, but updating them can

improve relevance and usability. Preliminary findings indicate the need to expand policy scope to address emerging challenges, strengthen interconnections across areas, integrate data and evidence-based tools, clarify links to implementation, and reinforce community engagement and cultural knowledge. These refinements will ensure the State Plan continues to guide coordinated, sustainable, and culturally informed planning in Hawai‘i.

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