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VOLCANIC ASH

Where's the city leadership?

By David Shapiro

Rusti the orangutan's fruitless quest for decent housing illustrates how the best of intentions can be undone by petty power-tripping and small-minded politics.



Rusti has been cramped for more than six years in an obsolete gorilla cage at the Honolulu Zoo, stuck there while everybody with the slightest bit of power over his future presses their own interests ahead of his.

It points up the fundamental dysfunction of our local government: If we can't work together to find a suitable home for one ape, how can we ever hope to solve the bigger and more complex dilemmas that confront our community?

Rusti has been a "temporary" guest of the Honolulu Zoo since 1997 as the Orangutan Foundation International, which rescued him from a roadside zoo on the Mainland, looks for a permanent home.

Proposals to build him new quarters at Pana'ewa on the Big Island and Kualoa Ranch on O'ahu fell through in disputes over funding and legalities involving state and county planning agencies, the Board of Agriculture, warring zoo employees, animal rights activists and environmentalists.

A fallback plan to send Rusti to an orangutan preserve in Florida, where he would live with his own kind and have room to roam, was discarded because of claims that travel under sedation would be too traumatic for him.

All the while, the Orangutan Foundation raised money off Rusti while failing to fulfill its obligation to get him into a proper environment.

It finally appeared settled a couple of months ago when Mayor Jeremy Harris announced an agreement with the Orangutan Foundation to build Rusti a spacious new enclosure around a banyan tree at the Honolulu Zoo.

The Orangutan Foundation, as Rusti's owner, would pay for the \$200,000 exhibit and his food. The city would maintain the enclosure and provide healthcare.

It seemed a good deal all around; the Orangutan Foundation would finally get Rusti properly settled, and the zoo would get to keep one of its most popular attractions.

But then the City Council got in the act by voicing legal worries —among them that the city might be held liable if Rusti ever escaped the zoo and terrorized the populace.

Council members had a right to their concerns, but instead of calling everybody together to resolve relatively minor issues, they turned it into a protracted political squabble in their determination to fight childishly with the mayor at any opportunity.

Now the American Zoo and Aquarium Association has chimed in with a threat that Rusti's enclosure as proposed might endanger the zoo's accreditation.

So the structure for Rusti that was supposed to be finished by August has been delayed for at least two months.

On the fringe of the battle, grumpy old fussbudgets complain that as long as we have homeless human beings in our

community, we have no business worrying about housing a dispossessed ape.

Following that thinking to its logical conclusion, we should shut down the entire zoo until there are no more homeless people.

Which brings us back to the bigger concern: If in six years we can't figure out what to do with one unassuming primate, how can we ever hope to solve a truly difficult problem such as homelessness?

If we don't feel Rusti is earning his bananas by enchanting zoo visitors, perhaps we should find him a day job to help support himself.

Here's an idea: Let's put the big ape on the City Council. He'd be right in his element and have lots of new friends to play games with.

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