

Survey: Princeville residents overwhelmingly dislike 'glamping' plan

By [Allan Parachini Special to The Garden Island](#) | Sunday, February 7, 2021, 12:05 a.m.

PRINCEVILLE — A stunning 94% of Princeville residents and property owners believe that preserving open space in Hawai'i's first planned community is critical as it ponders its options in resisting a proposed luxury-camping resort.

Nearly 82% of 782 people who responded to a recent survey by the Princeville at Hanalei Community Association say preserving open space — including golf courses and parks — in the community is "very important," with a significantly-smaller portion saying it is "fairly important" or "important."

A large proportion of the community — 42.3% — said they would support litigation to prevent development on Princeville's open spaces, while just 19.6% said they would not. Another 19.3% were unsure.

Although the survey sample included only about a quarter of Princeville property owners, longtime residents said it was by far the largest response to any local issue in recent Princeville history. Rory Enright, the retired former general manager of the community association, agreed.

The survey was conducted by email over a one-week span just before the holiday season, driven by community concern over a proposal to build a luxury camping resort on three holes of one of the two courses that make

up the Princeville Makai Golf Club.

Meanwhile, there were several indications that Starwood Capital Group, which owns the golf course and the nearby former Princeville Resort, may be reconsidering its decision to install the glamping complex in the face of overwhelming community opposition. Starwood is redeveloping the hotel to become part of its luxury spa brand, 1 Hotels.

Several travel-related news sites reported last week that Barry Sternlicht, CEO of Starwood and the driving force behind its hotel-development strategies, has stepped down. The glamping project is thought to have been a personal priority for Sternlicht.

The Princeville glamping controversy has emerged as more than simply complaints from Princeville's dominantly-white residents about the prospect of a camping resort being built near their homes.

It appears to be part of a larger statewide and national debate over the role of open spaces as community assets in golf-course communities, which, like Princeville today, increasingly include local families with young children.

The controversy has been driven by the fact that an unusual covenant that dates to the 1970s guarantees that Princeville's golf courses remain free of development — but only until 2026. Many critics of Starwood's approach contend that the company isn't really serious about the glamping resort but wants to use it as a pretext to begin installing infrastructure to support new development when the covenant expires.

The company's initial approach to the glamping project suggested that it sought to hold the community hostage with the implicit threat that it will move forward with major development after 2026.

Enright, who was Princeville's general manager for a decade, said the resolve to protect its open spaces "was a very strong statement in providing the board support to aggressively protect the community."

"If in fact you are going to defend the community's open spaces," he said, "you have to be willing to stand up against all incursions. The fight is really about what happens in 2026. Glamping is not the issue."

Starwood confirmed Sternlicht's departure as CEO late Friday. But the company declined to comment on whether it is rethinking the project or considering abandoning it. The resort would be built on three holes of the Woods Course, part of the Makai golf complex. It would have 50 units, luxury tents, for which guests would pay about \$500 per night.

However, Jason Cruce, a Starwood executive who has been directly involved in the glamping proposal, said last week in response to a separate email inquiry: "We are continuing to review the project proposal and have not yet filed any permits with the Planning Department.

"We look forward to providing an update to the community when we have more to share."

Sam George, president of the community association, which conducted the survey, said the organization had not been contacted by Starwood recently regarding the status of the project.

"We are waiting for Starwood to get back to us," George said. "We will not take a position if we don't have to. I'm hesitant to think that the glamping project is going to go ahead."

George also said the community association was informed recently that the executive most closely involved at East West Partners, which is developing

the hotel project for Starwood, has left the Colorado-based firm.

A community source closely familiar with the situation said, "East West Partners communicated to the board recently that the owner is still evaluating the glamping project, so all is on hold."

The uncertainty about whether Starwood remains committed to the project did not appear to dampen community outrage about the glamping proposal.

"This is what these developers do when they want to invade a resort with open space," said attorney Tom Mull who, along with his wife, owns a home adjacent to one of the three holes on the golf course that the resort would occupy. Mull noted the high proportion of residents who oppose open-space development, saying, "Our issue is not glamping. Our issue is development. Starwood is starting to soften."

While the survey found near-unanimous support for preserving Princeville's open spaces, the community survey seemingly found fissures in the collective resolve.

For example, nearly equal numbers of respondents — about 41% — said they oppose the glamping project regardless of any minor concessions Starwood might make, and that the community association should negotiate with Starwood over the community ultimately supporting it.

Asked if the community association should withdraw its opposition to the glamping development in exchange for a permanent ban on development of the rest of the golf property, 39.5% agreed, while 32.25% said no.

A majority — 54.7% — said they would support the glamping project in exchange for a commitment by Starwood not to develop any part of the golf courses except the glamping site for 30 years.

Mull's wife, Lorri, also an attorney and former law-school dean, said the survey's findings about the strength of community support for open spaces were key. "The idea that somebody is trying to mess this place up that people worked so hard to build," she said, "is kind of hard to follow."

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