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Hawaii: Little federal money available to buy Turtle Bay

By MARK NIESSE

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HONOLULU — Three members of Hawaii's congressional delegation doubt they'll be able to find much federal money for Gov. Linda Lingle's effort to buy Turtle Bay Resort on Oahu's North Shore, and they're questioning the viability of her plans.

Sen. Daniel Inouye called Lingle's request for help "delinquent" in a sharply worded letter to her.

Reps. Neil Abercrombie and Mazie Hirono took a softer tone in a letter sent Thursday, but they also said they need more basic information about the purchase idea.

"I have no idea what is real or not, feasible or simply wishful thinking," Inouye wrote Tuesday. "I would need to see a budget or some sort of financing plan before I could even begin to have any meaningful conversations about possible federal contributions."

Abercrombie and Hirono told Lingle the U.S. House Appropriations Committee has a long-standing prohibition against earmarking money for state land acquisition projects, but she could apply for various grants.

"Federal participation is extremely limited by the prohibition on funding state land acquisitions," they wrote. "We will certainly explore seeking federal dollars, however limited, in furtherance of protecting the area for future generations."

Lingle, a Republican, has received the letters from the three Democratic lawmakers but did not have a response Thursday, a spokesman said. Sen. Daniel Akaka, also a Democrat, did not send a letter to the governor.

Their replies answered Lingle's March 31 request that they "play an important role in this project by providing federal financial resources for the acquisition." She gave them a mid-April deadline to tell her what steps they could take to assist the Turtle Bay project.

The representatives suggested Lingle try to use grant money from the Land and Water Conservation Fund, which allotted \$300,000 to Hawaii in 2006 and 2007. Or the state could try to seek money from the Cooperative Endangered Species Conservation Fund in 2009, which awarded three grants to Hawaii in March worth more than \$1 million.

They also pointed to three other grant programs that could help, although they ruled out using the Farm Bill because it's not appropriate to use that legislation for state land buys.

"Development pressures have been increasing, especially on the neighbor islands, and funds spent on Turtle Bay cannot be spent on other priority acquisitions. Looking for creative partnerships to achieve the goals of preserving open space and coastal protection that we all share is critical," the letter said.

Lingle announced her surprise plan to buy and preserve Turtle Bay in her State of the State speech in January. Since then, she has held a community meeting on the issue and discussed it with Oaktree Capital Management LLC, the landowners.

Inouye said he heard the deal could cost the state \$400 million, but Lingle has said she believes the land can be acquired for significantly less. She hopes to find a third party to run the resort part of the property while preserving its surrounding lands.

State lawmakers are considering two bills to ease the purchase.