The redevelopment of the Mayor Wright Housing complex has been seen as a golden opportunity to narrow the gap between the demand for affordable rentals and the state's capacity to fill it.

There is hope for progress toward that goal — as well as concern that it won't be enough, given the accommodations to its private partner's investment aims.

This project can't meet as much of that demand as taxpayers might have hoped. But it's already plain that the Mayor Wright plan has raised the bar for delivering low-income rentals, at least above what other transit-oriented development proposals are yielding so far.

And the deal, signed last week, underscores that future projects envisioned along the rail route by other developers must be held to the principle that providing affordable housing is an imperative, not an afterthought.

Hawaii Public Housing Authority (HPHA) officials on Friday inked a master development agreement with its private partner, Hunt Development Corp., to recast the aging public-housing complex on 15 acres as a mixed-income, mixed-use community.

Its centerpiece will be a $1.3 billion high-rise complex with 2,500 units, nearly seven times the number of rentals currently onsite.

However, only 15 percent of those will be reserved for public- housing-qualified families, with an additional 8 percent of units committed to households holding housing subsidy vouchers under the federal Section 8 program.

Of the total apartments, 34 percent will be rented at fair-market rent, with 43 percent in the "affordable" class, bound for tenants who make up to 120 percent of the area median income (AMI).

To put this into dollars-and-cents context, 100 percent AMI for a single person is $60,600 in annual earnings, or $86,600 for a family of four.

HPHA is limited on the number of public-housing units it can rebuild on this site. A 1999 law known as the "Faircloth Amendment" states that the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development is barred from building or adding public housing units. This aims to prevent the public housing stock from outstripping the government's fiscal capacity.

To be sure, having a mix of income groups in a community is applauded by urban planners because it tends to avert the downward spiral of housing projects into slums.

The public must hope that the experts are right and that adding housing stock at all levels will trickle down and help meet Hawaii's primary need, which is at 80 percent AMI and below.

Redevelopment must maintain a sense of place here on the threshhold of Chinatown for an established, diverse community. This property is sure to increase in value, and care must be taken that the inevitable gentrification does not displace those who now call Kalihi home.

Hakim Ouansafi, executive director of HPHA, emphasized that two-thirds of the units would be in the range between public-housing level (zero to 30 percent AMI) up to "workforce," which is 120 percent AMI or below. There are nine other sites along the rail route, including one nearby at School Street, where the agency sees potential to increase the affordable inventory further.

For the Mayor Wright project itself, the governor is seeking $4.5 million from the coming legislative session, to cover the entitlement and other pre-development costs, Ouansafi said; planning and construction funds will be requested in 2019 for the project's first phase.

The planning process already has begun with a notice of intent to prepare the environmental impact statement required of the project. That will afford the public opportunity to weigh in and help shape the future community.

And starting in a few weeks, with the opening of the 2018 Legislature, lawmakers will get their chance to demonstrate their commitment to affordable housing.

Hawaii has to capitalize on every opportunity to meet its growing need.