

Mark Zuckerberg 'reconsiders' forcing Hawaiians to sell him their land

Facebook CEO makes statement after backlash over 'quiet title actions' to secure parcels belonging to native owners within his \$100m seafront property



Pilaa beach, below hillside and ridgetop land owned by Facebook CEO Mark Zuckerberg in Hawaii. Photograph: Ron Kosen/AP

Nadia Khomami
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Mark Zuckerberg has said he is reconsidering whether to seek the forced sale of tracts of land belonging to native Hawaiians in a large estate he bought on the island of Kauai, after facing a wave of criticism.

The Facebook CEO filed a series of lawsuits, known as quiet title actions, against hundreds of Hawaiians who may own small parcels of land within the boundaries of his seafront property on Kauai. The quiet title system is used to establish ownership of land where inheritance has occurred over generations and lacks formal documentation. It can result in owners being forced to sell their land at auction and, in some cases, pay the legal fees of the plaintiff.

“Based on feedback from the local community we are reconsidering the quiet title process and discussing how to move forward,” Zuckerberg said in a statement

following a backlash from locals who viewed the billionaire as adopting the same legal mechanisms used by former sugar barons to displace Native Hawaiians from their ancestral lands in the 1800s. One law professor from the University of Hawaii said Zuckerberg's actions were "the face of neocolonialism".

Zuckerberg added: "We want to make sure we are following a process that protects the interests of property owners, respects the traditions of native Hawaiians and preserves the environment."

Hawaii state representative Kaniela Ing said he was heartened by the news. In response to the controversy Ing had introduced a bill that could force real estate buyers into mandating mediation in actions involving Native Hawaiians.

Ing's bill would allow a parcel's shareholders to band together in a group in mediation against the person seeking to buy the land, in an attempt to give people with rights to the land more bargaining power as a group against wealthy landowners like Zuckerberg. It would also lessen the burden on families facing potentially costly land rights legal battles.

"I *mahalo* Mr Zuckerberg for his words of *aloha* and willingness to talk," Ing said in a statement on Wednesday. He then urged the social media executive to drop the legal actions, support a local legal organisation and "join us at the table to restart a positive dialogue as mutual stewards of land and culture".

Zuckerberg's statement came a few days after he posted on Facebook an explanation of his Hawaii plans, as news of the actions drew headlines and anger.

He said in the post that the estate was made up of several properties and while he worked with majority owners of the tracts of land to reach a fair deal, he had filed the actions to identify all the partial owners. He said the tracts could be split between hundreds of descendants.

"For most of these folks they will now receive money for something they never even knew they had. No one will be forced off the land," he wrote.

Forbes reported that Zuckerberg, currently the world's fifth richest person, paid close to \$100m (£79m) in 2014 for the 283 hectares (700 acres) on the secluded north shores of Kauai, known as the Garden Island.

The region is popular with tourists, celebrities and millionaires, and has served as the backdrop for films including Jurassic Park and Pirates of the Caribbean.

Ing told CBC that the Zuckerberg property was "a gorgeous, enormous chunk of land". "There's like a six-foot wall surrounding the property to not allow locals to walk through it. But other than that, it's breathtaking," he said.

He added that despite the legal nuances, the larger issue was whether any one person needed 700 acres. "It just seems sort of excessive, no matter how much money you make. Especially when you're talking about an island community. That's going to be very disruptive to your neighbours. The least you can do is go into the community,

explain to your neighbours what your intentions are and Mr Zuckerberg did none of that. The first communication that a lot of the folks that own the *kuleana* parcels received was a letter stating that they've been sued."