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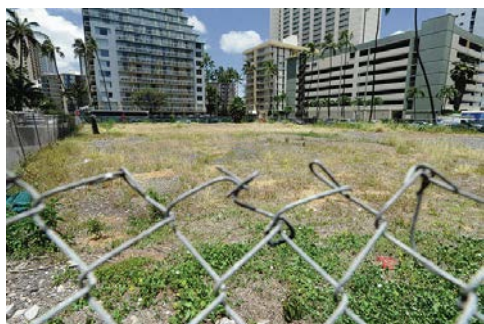
**Hawaii News**

## **City Council to vote on a long-awaited Waikiki park project**

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A vacant lot will become a gated green area in Waikiki with the approval of what would become Centennial Park in a vote today before the Honolulu City Council.

The Council's first and only vote would formalize a 2016 public-private partnership between the city and the Rotary Club of Honolulu to transform 2251 Aloha Drive into a public park complete with fencing, trees, benches, an open area, lighted walkways and an irrigation system.

It's a project that some in the Waikiki community have pushed for nearly two decades. In 2003 the city nixed a high-rise planned for the lot and condemned the land for "an open-space park." The city paid \$2.57 million for the 35,480-square-foot property, which is situated one block mauka of Kuhio Avenue and bordered by Aloha Drive, Manukai Street and Seaside and Royal Hawaiian avenues.

But some 16 years after that promise, the lot is still a mass of weeds, litter and graffiti. Controversy emerged over how to execute the project, which has been redesigned to include a Hawaiian Electric switching station and a traffic staging area. Three donors, who contributed to the \$570,000 raised so far, have even asked for their money back.

The Rotary's Rob Hale, Centennial Park committee chairman, said the club has received mostly positive feedback on the latest plans, with a "very, very small" amount of complaints.

"Basically, the community wants to see this park built," Hale said. "Those in favor outweigh those that are opposed by a long shot."

Waikiki Neighborhood Board Chairman Bob Finley, who lives across the street from the proposed park, certainly wants to see the project come to fruition.

"It's time to get that lot cleaned up and turned into a park," Finley said. "I advocated for it through four city administrations. The kids and young people that came and testified that they wanted a park in their neighborhood are probably parents by now; some may even be grandparents."

However, Waikiki Neighborhood Board member Kathryn Henski says plans for the park have divided the community and Rotarians, and she wants issues that have come up concerning it addressed before a city vote is taken.

"I support the park in its former state, but I don't want it to move forward in its current state," said Henski, a member of the Rotary Club of Waikiki. "They've changed the fence and sidewalk areas, and HECO has no business being in that park. I don't blame people for wanting their money back. It's premature that City Council is having this vote."

Jed Gaines, a former member of Rotary's Centennial Park Committee, said HECO's involvement and other park changes prompted him to resign his 27-year membership in the Rotary Club of Honolulu. Gaines added that he and his wife, Marilyn Libin, also asked Rotary to return the \$10,000 that they donated. So far, he said, they have not received a refund.

"A HECO switching station is just not the Rotary way. We shouldn't be involved in a for-profit project," Gaines said. "It would have been built if HECO hadn't gotten involved."

Jim Alberts, HECO senior vice president of business development and strategy, said HECO would work with Rotary on the design of the new switch station, which he said would benefit the community around the park by ensuring that power is restored more quickly after an outage. The utility will pay the city an annual easement fee for use of the park space, he said.

The utility turned to Rotary only after falling short of finding other locations to replace its aging switch station at the Marine Surf Waikiki, Alberts said.

“We could power from the current switch station for a while, but it’s like driving a 20-year-old car — eventually you have to make it modern. The new self-contained switch gear is too big to put back in the Marine Surf,” Alberts said.

“We have switch stations in other parks, and we haven’t had any trouble,” Alberts said.

HECO has agreed to make \$100,000 in city and club contributions toward the park.

Hale said HECO’s involvement in the project has not delayed the process as some critics have suggested. He said the park should be built by summer 2020.