Waikīkī’s Infrastructure Needs Constant Attention

By Dr. Richard Kelley

Earlier this week, Royal Hawaiian Avenue, in the heart of Waikīkī, looked a lot like a canal in Venice or the flooded towns in Queensland, Australia, following the recent cyclones. The cause of the flooding in Waikīkī was a break in the 12-inch water main between Waikolu Way and Kuhio Avenue, right next to the OHANA Waikiki Malia Hotel. The break has now been repaired, but it causes one to ask, what is the condition of Waikīkī’s infrastructure?

In many cities, infrastructure is often neglected. Water mains, sewer pipes, electrical lines, and pipes carrying gas are absolutely critical—but not exactly glamorous. They are also underground and thus, out of sight. So it is easy to take them for granted and forget about the time, money, and maintenance required to deliver these essential services to all the hotels, restaurants, condos, and shops, particularly in a densely built-up area like Waikīkī.

The fact that Waikīkī is actually a river delta presents an additional challenge. Over the centuries, Mānoa and Palolo streams washed bits of the Koolau Mountains down toward the ocean, gradually forming the land that is now Waikīkī. When the Ala Wai was dredged in 1928, the soil and crushed coral removed was spread on the delta’s lands, adding a couple of feet to Waikīkī’s elevation above sea level. However, under the streets today, the soil, much of which is this fill, is somewhat loose and subject to shifting. So, it is not surprising that over the years, a water or sewer pipe might be bent or stressed to the point of breaking.

Mary Vorsino, writing in the Honolulu Advertiser, asked that very question almost three years ago. Several permits for major buildings had recently been issued, including the one for the 35-story Trump International Hotel and Tower adjacent to the Waikiki Beach Walk® redevelopment. Yet the city was working off a 12-year old master infrastructure plan for Waikīkī. Huge emergency bypass pipes lay along the banks of the Ala Wai Canal, carrying Waikīkī’s sewage away from our state’s No. 1 tourist attraction and its famous beach. Why the bypass? Because in March 2006, an aging sewer main had ruptured, and, in an effort to keep the muck from backing up into hotels, businesses, and residences, 48 million gallons of raw sewage had had to be dumped into the Ala Wai. The bypass was a temporary, ugly fix that would remain like a scar along the canal until the main could be replaced.

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the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) summit and associated meetings in November. We want to look our very best when President Obama and the heads of 20 other Asia-Pacific nations arrive. The summit will last only two days, but related events and activities will go on for nearly two weeks, and Waikiki will receive intense media coverage around the globe.

So right now, in preparation for APEC, workers are tearing up slabs of fractured and uneven concrete on the sidewalks along Kalakaua Avenue and preparing to replace them with a beautiful stone surface similar to what is already found in other parts of Waikiki.

In addition, to beautify the drive from the airport to Waikiki’s hotels, the state is placing all utility lines underground along Ala Moana Boulevard and Nimitz Highway from the Aloha Tower to Waikiki. What’s more, the existing streetlights along this route will be replaced with old-fashioned fixtures similar to those in Waikiki.

According to KITV 4 News, “the federal government is paying for 73 percent of the $37 million price tag of the project. The state is picking up 20 percent and utility companies are covering the other 7 percent, since their lines are being placed underground.”

And, yes, many of Waikiki’s streets are also being repaved, and those pesky potholes that appeared following this year’s heavy rains are being repaired!

Waikiki will look much different when President Obama and the APEC delegates arrive just a little over seven months from now. Security will be tight on everything, including all utility services.

Most delegates will not give a second thought to the infrastructure needed to make their stay comfortable, pleasant, and safe. But members of our ohana who live and work in Waikiki and who may have seen the flooding on Royal Hawaiian Avenue this week will think about it a lot and hope it all hangs together at least until the dignitaries and the media leave town.

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