Welcome Back American Legion!

Waikiki will be hopping this week as it hosts 13,000 members of the American Legion attending that organization’s 87th National Convention. Economists estimate the convention will generate $32.7 million in visitor spending and $2.7 million in tax revenue for the state. Many delegates and their families will include a visit to one or more of the neighbor islands before or after the Waikiki meetings. That is good news in itself, but because the Legion’s last visit to Waikiki in 1981 played an important role in the development of the Hawaii Convention Center, the return of the American Legion in 2005 holds special meaning for me and perhaps other old timers in our ‘ohana and Hawaii’s visitor industry.

I remember the 1981 American Legion meeting in Waikiki very well. Relatives of mine from Montana, Bob and Katie Williams, attended and brought along their whole family. It was a fun, but hectic time. Waikiki was just not prepared to handle major conventions even though the area’s hotels were capable of housing all the conventioneers. Without a full-sized convention center, however, delegates had to be shuttled to hotel ballrooms all over Waikiki for meetings, events, and educational sessions. Space for a tradeshow was critically short and some exhibits were placed in stuffy, non-air-conditioned tents in parking lots. Not only the American Legion, but organizations such as the American Bar Association, American Bankers Association, National Association of Realtors, American Dental Association, and American Society of Travel Agents all suffered from the lack of a proper convention facility.

It was a mess, and group after group told the Hawaii Visitors Bureau that their organizations were growing, other cities were developing state-of-the-art meeting venues, and they would not return to Hawaii in the future if someone did not develop a major, modern convention facility.

I personally received that message loud and clear, not only from Bob Williams, but from the top executives of the American Legion head office, and it was that experience as much as anything else that started me on a 16-year, often quixotic attempt to develop a first-class convention center in the heart of Waikiki.

Little did I know of the twists and turns in the road ahead. However, with the hard work, enthusiasm, and support of many people, the Hawaii Convention Center was finally opened in 1997, over a decade and a half later. Today, it is recognized as one of the leading meeting facilities in the nation, with outstanding customer service, technological amenities, world-class cuisine, and distinctive architecture. According to Hawaii Meetings & Events magazine, the Hawaii Convention Center has won seven consecutive Prime Site Awards and much other recognition.

The delegates attending the American Legion convention will find a new and changing Waikiki. During the past two decades, there has been a great deal of upgrading and renovations, including improvements along its two major arteries, Kalakaua and Kuhio avenues, and the addition of statues and the markers of the Waikiki Historic Trail. They will also notice that work is in progress on our company’s Waikiki Beach Walk project, and they might read about planned renovations of other major areas in Waikiki, including the Royal Hawaiian Shopping Center, the International Marketplace, and the former site of the Waikiki Theaters, all of which will be starting in the not-too-distant future.

The planners of other large conventions and meetings have taken notice and are booking their groups at the Hawaii Convention Center. The American Medical Association, Sweet Adelines International, the American Academy of Cosmetic Dentistry, the Baptist World Congress, and the American College of Gastroenterology have all recently made
commitments to hold major events in Waikiki, "Where Business and Aloha Meet."

I am happy to report that Bob Williams, a loyal supporter of the American Legion, will once again be attending the convention. Like many other delegates, he will be staying at an OHANA hotel, the OHANA Islander Waikiki. On Thursday, I met Bob and Katie for a cup of coffee, and I took delight in telling them of how their comments and those of others in the American Legion two decades ago helped lead Waikiki onto a 16-year odyssey that culminated in the development of the beautiful convention center where they are holding their 87th national meeting this week.

American Legion Room Blocks at OHANA Hotels

<table>
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<th>Hotel</th>
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<td>OHANA Royal Islander</td>
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<td>OHANA Waikiki Surf East</td>
<td>81</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>1,163</strong></td>
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</tbody>
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American Legion Convention Schedule

**August 16 – 17**
Move into convention center

**August 18 - 23**
Exhibits open

**August 18 – 22**
Committee meetings

**August 21**
Parade – Ft. DeRussy to Kapiolani Park
(4 p.m. – 8 p.m.)

**August 23 – 25**
General sessions

Legionnaires’s Disease

The presence of the American Legion’s national convention in our OHANA hotels this week is most welcome. I am sure that everything will go well, and all delegates and their families will enjoy their visit in Waikiki. However, the occasion is also a reminder of
another American Legion meeting that did not turn out as expected.

In 1976, the Pennsylvania posts of the American Legion gathered at the Bellevue Stratford Hotel in Philadelphia. During and after the meetings, 221 people, most of them delegates, contracted a severe respiratory disease, and 34 of them died.

It was later determined that the illness had been caused by a bacterial organism that lived in the water of the hotel’s air conditioning system. After its identification, the bacterium was named *Legionella pneumophila*.

*Legionella* can grow easily in water systems, especially if algae and scale are present. The bacteria can be dispensed into the air by aerosol mist generated by the air conditioning system. Sometimes, if there is a cross link between a building’s air conditioning and water systems, *Legionella* can be found in tap water and whirlpool spas, according to the Canadian Center for Occupational Health and Safety.

Since the recognition of the potential hazard of *Legionella* growth in building air conditioning and water systems, new standards of care have greatly reduced but not eliminated Legionnaire’s Disease as a significant threat to hotel guests. The bacteria are still around.

We must continue to be aware of the fact that in the hospitality business, we have a moral and legal responsibility to ensure the health and safety of our guests. We must be eternally careful, proactive, and vigilant to be sure that all our mechanical, electrical, and life safety systems are always in top working order.