

July 21, 2009

Ms. Virginia Hinshaw, Chancellor
University of Hawai'i at Manoa
Hawai'i Hall 202
2500 Campus Road
Honolulu, HI 96822

Aloha Chancellor Hinshaw:

I am writing to express The Outdoor Circle's (TOC) grave concern over the site selected for the construction of a Student Recreation Center adjacent to the Campus Center at the Manoa Campus.

The Outdoor Circle was founded in 1912 to protect the scenic environment of Hawai'i. We have branches on all islands and thousands of members, statewide. One of our functions is to protect, preserve and perpetuate the trees of Hawai'i. Over the years TOC has been responsible for tree plantings such as the Monkey Pods that circle Aala Park and the Exceptional Mahogany trees that line Kalakaua and make an entry statement to those who enter Waikiki, to mention just two. We work regularly on tree issues with state and county tree professionals, including those at the Manoa Campus. Throughout the years TOC has become the unofficial clearinghouse for information about planting, pruning, protecting—on nearly all tree-related issues.

We are aware that an Environmental Assessment (EA) was completed on the Student Recreation Center and that it did not identify any factors which could disqualify the preferred site. However, we were not fully aware of the EA's timing and deadlines or we would have responded in a timelier manner. Now that we've seen the proposal and contemplated the harm that the project will bring, we are stunned at the EA's Finding of No Significant Impact.

Last week we were taken on a tour of the proposed site by Campus Center officials, some of their contractors, and Vice Chancellor Eric Crispin. They showed us the entire project area including the buildings and landscaping that will be affected by the project. We were shocked and dismayed at what we saw.

As has happened on some other parts of the Manoa campus, we believe this project is being "shoehorned" into a space that is already suffering from an undesirable density of structures. This student/pedestrian unfriendly situation will be greatly exacerbated by the Recreation Center, whereas moving the site elsewhere would result in retaining open space where it is badly needed.

In addition the project will require the removal and relocations of a number of trees. Of great concern is the proposed destruction of the massive, beautiful and historic

Ficus Benjamina Comosa which grows mauka of the Campus Center. This tree will be destroyed if the Recreation Center is constructed at that site.

This Ficus might well be the only tree of its type in the State of Hawai‘i. It is believed to have been planted in the first part of the last century by renowned Botanist Dr. Joseph Rock. As such, it is part of a historic landscape that must be preserved as part of the living history of the Manoa Campus. We note that the U.H. Landscape Committee concurs with this assessment.

In short, this Ficus is one of the most beautiful and rare trees at the University and beyond. It is the kind of treasure that should be preserved and protected, not chopped down to make room for a building for which a much better site is available.

Part of the tree tour involved inspecting the “alternative” site for the Recreation Center, the relatively vast open areas immediately on the Ewa side of the Campus Center. This site currently contains a large open space as well as two one story office buildings that appear to be far more expendable than the rare tree and sparse open space at the preferred construction site.

Most disturbing of all is that when asked why the project was moving forward at the least desirable of the two sites, we were told by our hosts that it was because of timing. They said if they don’t get the project started the funding will lapse. In other words, they would rather spend millions of dollars to put a needed building in the wrong spot, than consider the best long-term interest of the University—place the building in a space that meets all of the needs with far fewer drawbacks.

We respectfully submit that bad decisions are being made about this project and they’re being made for the wrong reasons. We implore you to find a way to stop the process that will lead to these negative impacts on the University and its students. Hurrying this project because of a “spend it or lose it” mentality is a recipe for regret that will linger on the Manoa campus forever.

Please respond ASAP with your thoughts on the issues we have raised.

Respectfully

Mary Steiner
CEO

cc: Presley Pang, University of Hawaii Board of Regents
Eric Crispin, Asst. Vice Chancellor
Janet Gillmar, U.H. Landscape Committee
Nancy McMahan, State Historic Preservation Division