

Big Island

Banyan Tree Wasp Infestation Highlights Urban Decay In Hilo Waterfront

The plight of some 50 banyan trees near downtown Hilo puts a spotlight on Banyan Drive's deeper, longstanding troubles.



16

By Paula Dobbyn   / January 13, 2023

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HILO, Hawaii Island — An iconic section of Hawaii island is slowly dying and with it, an important piece of the state's history.

Invasive wasps coupled with government bureaucracy and complex social ills have contributed to the degeneration of Banyan Drive, one of Hawaii's most famous roadways.

The tree-lined street snakes along Waiakea Peninsula, a waterfront slice of Hilo that once attracted film stars, U.S. presidents, professional athletes and other notable figures.

High-profile visitors — including Franklin D. Roosevelt, Babe Ruth, Richard and Pat Nixon, Amelia Earhart, and King George V — planted banyan saplings along the drive starting in the 1930s. A Hollywood film crew planted the first baby banyan in October 1933 as acclaimed director Cecil B. DeMille

prepared to begin shooting, according to “[The Trees of Banyan Drive](#),” a book by author and forensic anthropologist Jane Lasswell Hoff.



Gull wasps have infested the trees that made Banyan Drive an iconic roadway in Hilo.

For decades, Banyan Drive was a major tourist attraction, marketed in airline magazines and visitor brochures. It still is, to some extent, with many of East Hawaii island’s hotels located on state-owned land there.

The area features [Liliuokalani Park and Gardens](#), a Japanese-style landscaped park with rock gardens, fishponds, pagodas, bridges and other themed elements along with about 50 banyan trees. On a recent morning, a group of people practiced yoga on a grassy spot along the drive while others walked their dogs, jogged or rode bikes.

But the former grandeur of Banyan Drive has largely faded. Several of the hotels that arose six decades ago have fallen into [disrepair](#), including Uncle Billy’s Hilo Bay Hotel and the former Country Club Condo Hotel. Uncle Billy’s closed in 2017 and suffered a major fire last March.

With laundry draped over balconies, a dumpster out front and crime-scene tape at the entrance, the Country Club building projects a dilapidated vibe.



Paula Dobbyn/Civil Beat/2023

Country Club Condo Hotel is one of several buildings on Banyan Drive falling into disrepair.

Homeless encampments, drug dealers and [squatters](#) add to the area's down-on-its-luck appearance.

Less visible than the urban blight is a ficus gall wasp, a tiny pest that is quietly but voraciously gnawing away at the area's majestic foliage.

The wasp — known as *Josephiella microcarpae* in Latin — was [first discovered in Hawaii in 1989](#) and has made its way to the Big Island, Oahu, Kauai, Maui, Molokai, Kahoolawe and Lanai.

It kills banyan trees by burrowing into branches, laying eggs into young leaves and soft tissue, and preventing new leaves from growing.

Gall wasps have devastated banyan trees in other parts of Hawaii. In 2017, McKinley High School on Oahu [removed a stand of banyan trees](#) on its front lawn that was damaged beyond repair from gall wasp infestation.

A growing number of Big Island residents are concerned that unless action is urgently taken to control the gall wasp infestation along Banyan Drive, the famous tree-lined street will become defoliated.

Don Inouye, owner of Reeds Bay Hotel, is among them.

“Banyan Drive and its trees are being neglected,” said Inouye, sitting in the lobby of his waterfront hotel on Banyan Drive. “It’s gone to hell.”

Inouye said he’s paid to have the banyan tree in front of his own property treated and pruned, costing him several hundred dollars.

Like other hotel owners on Banyan Drive, Inouye leases the land his hotel sits on from the Hawaii Department of Land and Natural Resources, a state agency that owns much of the peninsula.

The Hawaii County Public Works Department takes care of pruning some banyan trees when the aerial roots drape over the road, posing a hazard for motorists, said Parks and Recreation Director Maurice Messina.

But according to Inouye and others who recently formed a nonprofit called Friends of Historic Banyan Drive, no one is taking a holistic approach to caring for the trees’s long-term health because of jurisdictional finger-pointing.

“DLNR says it’s the county’s responsibility. The county says it’s DLNR’s,” said Lorna Larsen-Jeyte, a board member.



Joan Gossett holds a leaf that has been infected by gall wasp.



Lorna Larsen-Jeyte, left, and Joan Gossett are with Friends of Historic Banyan Drive.

Public Works cares for some banyan trees along the road and trims any branches that overhang the public right of way, Mayor Mitch Roth said in an email.

“Trees located on State land and private property are supposed to be cared for by private property owners and the State,” Roth said. “So it really depends on which trees you are talking about.”

DLNR takes a similar view.

“Most of the trees are within the county road boundaries. The others are with various lease properties and are the responsibility of the lessee to maintain,” a DLNR spokesperson said.

The overlapping jurisdiction has created a jumbled situation with head-scratching over who is responsible for the banyans, said Winston Welch,



Don Inouye is the owner of Reeds Bay Hotel in Hilo.

executive director of [The Outdoor Circle](#).

“Is it the state? Is it the county? Is it the lessees who may not have the recourse?” Welch said.

While he hopes government agencies will eventually sort it out, Welch isn’t willing to wait around for the trees to die. The Outdoor Circle applied for and received a \$7,500 grant to hire an arborist to spray 10 banyans with an insecticide called Safari along with a surfactant called Pentra Bark. The grant is from [Kaulunani Urban & Community Forestry Program](#).

Mike Kraus, owner of Treeworks Inc. based in Pepeekeo, has already tested the formula on one banyan.

“The results we got seemed to look promising. It appears the tree is doing better,” he said.

Kraus planned to start treating the other 10 trees this week.

While it’s encouraging that some action is being taken, only a portion of the trees will receive the treatment so it’s not a comprehensive or lasting solution, Larsen-Jeyte said.

“Many of them are ill and we’re concerned they’re going to die,” said Joan Gossett, a Friends of Historic Banyan Drive board member who volunteers with the East Hawaii Outdoor Circle.



A banyan tree planted in 1934 by the late Princess Abigail Kawanānākoa.

One of Friends of Historic Banyan Drive's goals is to get the state, county and private property owners talking to one another and coming up with a long-term management plan as well as the funding to take care of the banyans, Gossett said.

Hilo-born Rep. Chris Todd said what's happening with the banyan trees is symptomatic of larger issues facing Banyan Drive.

"It's a place to enjoy both nature and history. That's one of the tragedies of the situation," he said.



Rep. Chris Todd

There's no doubt that the tree-lined street is still a draw for residents and visitors alike but its troubles are complex and run deep.

He blames DLNR for collecting lease revenue from hotel owners but directing little of that money or attention toward maintaining the trees that make Banyan Drive so iconic.

Todd wants to see a Banyan Drive Redevelopment Authority and a master plan created through a public planning process.

He's tried to get legislation passed that would accomplish that but it's been rebuffed by the state Senate. Still, Todd said he isn't giving up.

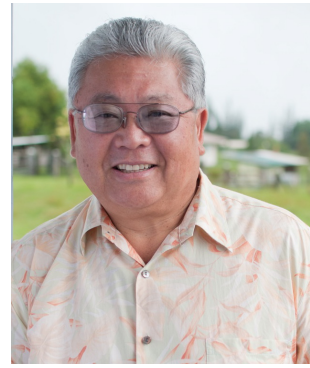
He's working with Rep. Richard Onishi, also from Hilo, to reintroduce a bill this upcoming legislative session, which opens Wednesday. If passed, it would take half of the money collected annually in lease payments along Banyan Drive and redirect the funds to a planning committee charged with devising a redevelopment master plan.

The idea of repurposing the funds has drawn opposition.

Onishi said he's hoping that under the new administration of Gov. Josh Green and change in the leadership at DLNR, the bill might get more support

and pass this time around.

University of Hawaii extension forester J.B. Friday said while the banyan trees are non-native, have significant health issues and are expensive to care for, they're worth saving.



Rep. Richard Onishi

“They’re this artificial tropical paradise that have had generations of people looking at them,” Friday said.

Besides raising awareness about the gall wasp infestation and lack of routine tree maintenance, Friends of Historic Banyan Drive wants to rally the public to help clean up the garbage that surrounds some of the trees and to commit as a community to reinvest in the place.

Inouye, a vibrant 90-something-year-old, said he’s hopeful Banyan Driven can be turned around during his lifetime.

“There’s enough people on this island who are concerned about Banyan Drive’s future,” he said.

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