

HAWAII NEWS

Uprooted trees at Honolulu park renewal have angered groups

By [Gordon Y.K. Pang](#) · Today · Updated 9:00 am

The Outdoor Circle, other community groups and two Honolulu City Council members are voicing displeasure that the city has removed and is replacing 26 canopy trees from the Magic Island parking lot without consulting with them before doing so.

Winston Welch, Outdoor Circle executive director, said Wednesday that his group has not formed a position on the project, but he said he believes the city moved forward with its plan without much notification or consultation about the actions being taken.

City officials, in response, said the nine pink tecoma, seven monkeypod, six banyan and four false Kamani trees were removed for valid reasons. Most were planted in the 1970s and none has been given Exceptional Tree designation. They are being replaced by 13 monkeypod and 13 hau trees, they said.

The tree replacement is part of a \$2.5 million project to repave the Magic Island parking lot, a project which is part of the city's long-term master plan for Ala Moana Regional Park, a plan that has drawn sometimes heated opposition in other phases.

The city [issued a news release on April 9](#) announcing that the project was set to proceed four days later and would include complete surface repaving and restriping; new curbing, irrigation, replacment of damaged trees and new plantings as part of the effort to improve the area. The project also was to include "removal of tree roots causing pavement damage," the release said.

Welch, however, said there wasn't enough detail about the trees.

There may be good reasons the city chose to remove the trees that it did and "it could be that the city is perfectly fine in all of this," he said. "But we have no way of knowing that.

He noted that in February, the Council adopted [Resolution 20-21](#), which calls for the city to obtain building permits from the Department of Planning and Permitting for significant paving work at Ala Moana, and that the applications for those permits also must include a tree disposition plan for the area.

“Tree removal must be avoided if possible, and if trees are removed, they must be relocated on-site or replaced,” the resolution said.

Welch pointed to information he found on DPP’s website showing a building permit application for site work throughout Ala Moana park “to include, but not limited to parking lot and street lighting.”

DPP Acting Director Kathy Sokugawa said late Wednesday that the city holds a grading permit for the project, but is required by Council Resolution 20-21 to obtain a building permit for other work. The city does have a pending application, as Welch mentioned, Sokugawa said, but she could not access the electronic documents within the application, after business hours, to see if it included the Magic Island work.

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City Design and Construction Director Mark Yonamine, in an email response to Honolulu Star-Advertiser questions, said there are different reasons that each of the 26 trees needed to be replaced, “including health of the trees, structural integrity, and survivability. We do not remove trees for no reason.”

The goal of the project is “to provide a better area for these new trees to thrive, with modified planting spaces and improved irrigation,” Yonamine said. “A Tree Risk Assessment Report conducted by a third-party certified arborist informed the city that trees in and around the Magic Island parking lot needed attention and warranted removal due to various afflictions.”

Welch, who said the Outdoor Circle usually has good communication with the city about the removal of trees around the island, said his organization has not even been told the name of the third-party arborist.

Among the groups joining the Outdoor Circle in raising issues about the Magic Island tree removals were Save Ala Moana Beach Park Hui, Oahu Island Parks Conservancy, Hawaii’s Thousand Friends and Hawaii Audubon Society.

Area Council members Ann Kobayashi and Tommy Waters this week also raised concerns about the tree removals.

Kobayashi, in a letter Tuesday, urged Mayor Kirk Caldwell to halt all tree removals at the park.

“Over the past few years, proposed changes to Ala Moana Regional Park ... has generated great public concern regarding the welfare and condition of the park,” she wrote. “Public notice should be provided when drastic changes, such as the removal of 26 trees, occur, especially when public access to the park is restricted.”

Strong public opposition nixed plans for an expanded walkway-promenade, all-inclusive active playground and a dog park.

Ala Moana and all other city parks were closed to the public last month in response to the coronavirus outbreak. They reopened last weekend, apparently after the trees were taken out. Kobayashi said that allowed the city to remove the trees out of public view.

Waters referenced the resolution the Council adopted two months ago requiring the city to obtain permits. He also pointed to concerns raised by the groups that threatened white terns often nest in banyan and monkeypod trees, and that the project’s master plan recommends tree removal take place in the fall and early winter when white tern breeding is at its lowest.



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