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FEATURES

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Efforts to Protect Threatened Kahala Shoreline

*Erosion and encroaching vegetation
cause for concern*

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While we all think of Hawaii as a land of boundless sand, sea and sky, it sometimes comes as a shock to see these resources as also finite. Certainly in the case of Kahala Beach, sand is disappearing before our eyes.

To longtime residents and beach-goers, Kahala Beach has always been a narrow strand that is governed by the tide, so that it may be very passable during low tides, and impassable at very high tides. What is of greatest concern now is not the tides, but the vegetation growing over the dunes into the active open beach, making public access difficult, if not impossible.

A slide presentation to the Waiialae-Kahala Neighborhood Board members and audience, titled "Protecting and Preserving Kahala's Shoreline," demonstrated the vagaries of this particular stretch of beach. Sam Lemmo (administrator, Office of Conservation & Coastal Lands - DLNR) iterated the department's mission to conserve and protect Hawaii's beaches and implement policies to preserve public access to the beaches. The basis for complaint by the department was that vegetation was encroaching on the beach, roughly from Hunakai Street to Waiialae Park.

We all think of Hawaii beaches as belonging to everybody, and according to Hawaii Revised Statute 115, we are all guaranteed "the right of access to Hawaii's shorelines,

[including] the right of transit along the shorelines." This statute was further revised to qualify that the shoreline exists below the "private property line which is defined as being along the upper reaches of the wash of waves, other than storm or seismic waves, at high tide during the season of the year in which the highest wash of the waves occurs, usually evidenced by the edge of vegetation or by the debris left by the wash of waves."

In a pristine environment, nature will run its course. 'Ahi 'ahi grass and naupaka grow up and along the dune, where the sand spreads and swirls under and around the low-profile vegetation. In populated areas, where private property extends to the coastal setback (established by the county), some of the vegetation has been enhanced by watering or encouraged to spread beyond the certified shoreline. Undesirable foliage, such as hau trees, creates unrelenting barriers during high tides. These unnatural obstructions and seawalls interfere with the normal seasonal erosion of the beach, which would ebb out and be returned with the next big wave.

Along pricey Kahala Beach, nature gets a run for its money. While residents obviously want to be by the ocean, they don't want it in their backyards. Worried that the next hurricane or tsunami would totally inundate their homes, some property owners want the dense barrier to protect them. Others have erected stone and sea walls that accelerate the erosion, causing drastic undercutting and further interfering with the normal wave actions along the shoreline.

In order to verify whether the vegetation went beyond allowed limits, a survey in early May documented the shoreline at high tide. On May 12, 2008, 12 residents were sent letters asking them to voluntarily remove the encroaching vegetation. Dolan Eversole, coastal geologist with UH's Sea Grant Program and DLNR, spokesperson for the presentation, indicated several residents did contact the department, primarily in protest.

Shoreline jurisdiction is under both county and state: the state/DLNR sets the "certified shoreline," seaward from the high tide line, and the county establishes the "coastal setback," landward from the high tide line. Through photos and visuals, Eversole showed examples of acceptable vegetation and others that were in violation. Normal patterns of wave action, cyclical fluctuations and sand movement from sea to shore were contrasted with photos of obstructions causing abnormal erosion and beach deterioration.

Stanton Johnston, a 60-year-resident on Kahala Beach, was allowed the floor to show photos and give history of the beach from an owner's perspective. Although he favors having the vegetation barrier against erosion onto his property, he demonstrated in numerous photos how excessive growth and seawalls not only cause severe erosion, but also that they are unsightly and collect massive amounts of debris that doesn't wash out.

Dialogue among the department representatives, Johnston and Lucinda Pyles - a Board member and Kahala Beach resident - acknowledged several areas of common ground. All agreed that some vegetation, namely the hau, have damaged the beach through erosion and denied beach access to the general public. Conversely, the vegetation helps deter erosion, if placed properly and of the appropriate type. Because coastal erosion is episodic and seasonal, large waves will cause a beach to temporarily change its profile. Unusually high tides will obliterate the shoreline whether there is vegetation or not, although the hau creates a physical barrier more than low-lying naupaka or grasses.

One concern is of consequences to non-compliance with the voluntary request to remove vegetation if beyond the setback. Right now, that will be determined by the response from the homeowners, and follow-up by the agency.

Eversole explained that coastal zone management program objectives and policies cover recreation, providing and managing adequate public access, consistent with conservation of natural resources, to and along shorelines with recreational value; and beach protection, which includes locating new structures inland from the shoreline setback to conserve open space, minimize interference with natural shoreline processes, and minimize loss of improvements due to erosion. He emphasized that working together with the community to improve the beaches is a priority. "We can't take it for granted," he concluded.