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Erosion of Waikiki Beach would cut Hawaii tourism by \$2 billion

Tourism forecast to lose \$2B if beach vanishes

By mary vorsino

Advertiser Urban Honolulu Writer

The disappearance of Waikiki Beach to erosion could cost the tourism industry nearly \$2 billion annually in lost visitor spending, trigger more than 6,000 job losses and shrink state tax revenues by about \$125 million a year, according to a new report based on surveys with Waikiki visitors.

The 123-page report, which asked visitors whether they would return to Waikiki if the beach were "completely eroded," is designed to illustrate how central Waikiki Beach is to the visitor industry and put the multimillion-dollar price tag of a beach-wide restoration in perspective for tourism officials.

"Obviously, we're going to have to spend some money to maintain the beach," said Rick Egged, president of the Waikiki Improvement Association, which co-funded the \$60,000 study with the Hawai'i Tourism Authority. "The purpose of the study was to get hard data of the value of the beach."

The study comes as the state is looking to draft a comprehensive, 10-year plan for fighting erosion along the world-famous Waikiki shoreline and as at least one hotel is taking the restoration of its portion of Waikiki Beach into its own hands. "There's an interest in repairing the beach at Waikiki," said Sam Lemmo, state Office of Conservation and Coastal Lands administrator, who estimates it could cost \$30 million to restore the length of Waikiki Beach.

But getting any money for beach restoration anytime soon won't be easy, with state departments slashing expenditures over the next two years to head off a \$1.1 billion deficit. The state Department of Land and Natural Resources does have \$500,000 that was released this year for Waikiki beach restoration, though officials have not yet decided where to spend that money.

Otherwise, there are no immediate state projects to address erosion in Waikiki. The last work to tackle Waikiki Beach erosion was a \$475,000 state demonstration project at Kuhio Beach, which was completed in January 2007 and pumped in about 9,500 cubic yards of sand from offshore.

That project is supposed to be repeated within five years.

Erosion along Waikiki Beach has long been called one of the biggest problems facing the No. 1 tourist destination in the Islands. Tourism experts point out that beach restoration work could improve visitor satisfaction ratings, translating into more return visits and millions of dollars in potential revenues.

Doing nothing, meanwhile, could spell disaster for the state's tourism industry, already shouldering a big hit in the global financial crisis. The new erosion report shows about 58 percent of west-bound visitors would "not consider staying in Waikiki" if the beach were completely eroded.

About 14 percent of Japanese tourists said they would not come.

The survey of about 500 visitors was conducted from May to July in Waikiki, and was used to extrapolate the potential losses to the visitor industry — and state economy — if Waikiki Beach disappears to erosion.

Egged said beach restoration is pricey, but not when compared to the potential losses if erosion continues. "In the whole scheme of things, it is somewhat expensive," he said. "But it's not really expensive when you talk about the value of this project. We know that we're losing beach."

In recent years, industry experts point out, many tourists have expressed concern in state surveys about crowding in Waikiki, which could be tied to the small size of the beach.

One recent mid-morning, the Waikiki shoreline was filling up fast. Tom Jurewicz, 51, of Seattle, sat on a small strip of sand near Queen's Beach. "I was a little disappointed," he said, of the size of the beach in places.

"It would be unfortunate," he added, for the beach to disappear.

Stacey Rose, 44, was raised in the Islands and remembers Waikiki Beach being much bigger when she was a kid. "There was a lot more (beach). It was way wider," she said, adding the thinning shoreline will almost surely have an impact on tourism.

"How many bodies can you fit on a little beach?" she said.

sea level a concern

In addition to erosion, hotels must be thinking about sea level rise over the next 50 years, coastal geology experts say, which could mean waves lapping up against beachfront hotels even if the beach is widened.

It's unclear how long it would take for Waikiki Beach to disappear to erosion, but some say erosion could eat away the entire beach within a decade or two.

"The beach is going to disappear (if nothing is done)," said Chip Fletcher, a University of Hawai'i coastal geology professor who has studied erosion in the

Islands extensively. "It's already gone along much of the Waikiki shoreline."

Currently in some places along the Waikiki coast, there are only small strips of sandy beach — or none at all during high tide. A sandy beach fronting the Sheraton Waikiki only emerges during very low tide. The rest of the time, Gray's Beach is under 2 feet to 3 feet of water that hits a beachwall.

The Sheraton is trying to change that, with a project that would pump in 15,000 cubic yards of sand from offshore and install three, 160-foot-long rock groins in the water fronting the property to keep the sand in place.

\$4 million project

Kyo-ya Hotels & Resorts, which owns the Sheraton Waikiki, is seeking several city, state and federal permits for the \$4 million plan. If all goes well, the work to create a beach big enough for 500 people would wrap up in 2011, after six to nine months of construction work.

Ernest Nishizaki, Kyo-ya executive vice president and chief operating officer, said the Gray's Beach project will benefit visitors and residents alike. "The restoration offers more than a new public beach," he said in a statement e-mailed to The Advertiser. "It will also enhance Waikiki's shoreline, greatly benefiting the preservation and protection of Hawai'i's natural resources."

The Kyo-ya plan is the first major shoreline restoration in Waikiki undertaken by a hotel since the early 20th century, and the groins would be the first permanent structures aimed at stopping erosion to be built off Waikiki in 30 years. The last groin was built in 1971 off Fort DeRussy.

Tourism experts say the Kyo-ya project, if it works, could spur other beachfront hotels to take a more active role in erosion along Waikiki. But the plan has also met early opposition from groups who don't want to see more permanent structures being installed in the water off Waikiki Beach.

They worry the structures could have unforeseen effects, including on popular Waikiki surf breaks. Kyo-ya engineers have said the surf breaks would not be affected by the proposed groins, but not everyone is convinced.

A state proposal to build T-groins at Kuhio Beach in 2000 was met with similar opposition. That project was tabled after lawmakers would not release \$2 million for the work because of community protests to the plan.

Scott Werny, co-chair of the Surfrider Foundation O'ahu chapter, said the official stance of the group is that it "does not support construction of hardened shoreline structures, since they typically harm adjacent beaches."

He added that more than anything now, Waikiki Beach needs a "comprehensive master plan to cover all Waikiki's beaches, created with adequate input from the

community." Lemmo, of the state Department of Land and Natural Resources' coastal lands division, said he is working to start the process of coming up with such a master plan in the coming year.

He said the plan would involve holding community meetings and drafting studies to determine just how much sand Waikiki is losing every year and what needs to be done to restore beaches and keep sand in place. And he said there is a possibility that the construction of T-head rock groins would be proposed.

"In some cases, you do need a structure," he said, adding that the comprehensive plan to restore Waikiki Beach over the next decade is still just in the planning stages, and hasn't even received planning funds.

He hopes to include a request for those funds this year or next.

Meanwhile, the Hawai'i Tourism Authority and DLNR have \$2 million available through 2010 for a dollar-for-dollar matching program. The program will match any private money spent on beach restoration in the Islands.

No one has applied for the funding yet, but interim HTA Chief Executive Officer Lloyd Unebasami said he expects Kyo-ya will get some of the money.

He also said the state is committed to restoring the Waikiki shoreline.

"Hawai'i is known for Waikiki Beach," Unebasami said. "Having that beach is very important ... to the experience of Hawai'i."

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