

## Working to Improve our Community

Interview with Brian Bagnall DVM, PhD  
President of the Greater Waikiki Branch of The Outdoor Circle

By Jeff Merz, AICP, Newsletter Editor and Planner with AECOM

**Brian, tell us about yourself, where you have lived, what brought you to Honolulu, your spouse, family etc.**

I'm a retired scientist, living in Waikiki for the past 18 months. I previously lived in south Florida seven years. Prior to Florida I worked for a pharmaceutical firm in Philadelphia 24 years and in Britain for ten years. I am originally from Sydney, Australia.

I moved to Hawaii with Michael, my partner of 25 years, to escape the overdevelopment and harsh politics of South Florida. Hawaii does not have the loud thunderstorms that come rolling along frequently in South Florida. Hurricane Wilma pummeled my Ft. Lauderdale area 11 years ago and the next major hurricane hitting the area is long overdue.



**What are the history, purpose and goals of The Outdoor Circle?**

Around the turn of the last century, women's federations and clubs were getting started in the United States. These new civic organizations coincided with the woman's suffrage movement and the progressive era political culture emphasizing civil rights, social equity and community betterment. On the heels of the fight for the vote, many women's groups organized as a way to improve civic pride and organize outside the home. The women who founded The Outdoor Circle in 1912 must have been truly

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amazing pioneers for their time. The Outdoor Circle is the oldest environmental preservation organization in Hawaii, established in 1912. It has seven active branches and only operates in the state of Hawaii. Its Mission is: "To keep Hawaii clean, green and beautiful for future generations by preserving, protecting, and enhancing our environment." It is a greatly respected local organization.

## **Tell us some of the successes (and failures) of Outdoor Circle projects in Hawaii.**

After many years of gutsy consumer actions and boycotts, The Outdoor Circle in 1926 persuaded the Territorial Legislature to pass Hawaii's law banning billboards throughout the territory. In fact they purchased the last billboard company in the state and then promptly shut it down. Today, Hawaii is one of only four states that prohibit billboards. The others are Vermont, Maine and Alaska. It also has a long history of promoting tree planting and preservation. Many of Honolulu's most beautiful trees were planted by The Outdoor Circle, well over 100,000 in total in Hawaii. The organization played a major role in the development of Ala Moana Park and Thomas Square too. In 1975, the Hawai'i Legislature passed the Exceptional Tree Act (Act 105) to protect designated trees - both public and private -- from improper trimming and unnecessary removal. For example, all the famous "tunnels of trees" along Ala Wai Promenade and Paki Avenue are protected Exceptional Trees. The Outdoor Circle tenaciously fought recently against advertising on city buses ("billboards on wheels"). As to failed efforts, we lost the battle to stop the rail project which the Outdoor Circle warned would be a "giant scar across our beautiful island."



## **What got you interested in The Outdoor Circle Waikiki?**

When I moved to Hawaii, I kept asking people "why is it so beautiful and with no ugly billboards and other outdoor advertising?" It took three months before somebody told me about The Outdoor Circle. With such hectic visitor activity it's no surprise that so few people in Waikiki know about us. I became

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interested when it was suggested that I help launch the first urban branch of The Outdoor Circle off the ground. I worked in a huge international corporation for 28 years and I guess I thrive on challenges. I like meeting interesting people too, especially town planners!

**Way to butter up to our planner readership, Brian. Anyway, how did this arm of the Outdoor Circle get started and how long has it been around?**

We call it the Greater Waikiki Branch to include Waikiki and the two big parks (Ala Moana and Kapiolani) as book ends on each side of Waikiki. We began in January 2016 and have just launched our own comprehensive website. Check it out here: <http://www.waikikioutdoorcircle.org/>. In a few months we hope to hold regular public meetings with invited speakers and more regular programs.



Iconic Banyan Tree near the Honolulu Zoo  
<http://www.waikikioutdoorcircle.org>

**What is the mission of the Waikiki group and how does it differ from the other six branches?**

Some of the other branches are very active in promoting green spaces, trees and signage laws. There is a small state office here in Honolulu with just three staff to manage the finances, membership, legislation, etc. As the first and only urban branch of The Outdoor Circle, we in the Greater Waikiki branch face a lot of unique issues such as promoting “livability,” infusing nature and green space into a dense, high-rise environment and offering urban dwellers “tree-lovers walking tours,” etc. We love our

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neighborhood of Waikiki and want to be known as a group that celebrates all the good things we have here. But of course we need to be vigilant that the long-established signage laws are not abused and that more trees will be protected and planted. It's a very unique place in the world with a balance of major hotels and businesses makai of Kuhio Avenue and yet still has a large and peaceful residential zone on the mauka side. Let's hope it stays that way despite all the massive hotel and condo towers that are going up everywhere. It's not enough for developers to put terraces and trees high up on top of their garages for the exclusive use and enjoyment of those who live there. We want to see more publicly-accessible greenery/open space at the street level for everyone to enjoy.

## **Tell us about some recent and future activities associated with the Waikiki Outdoor Circle.**

We recently partnered with Better Block Hawaii to promote and complete our first annual Jane's Walk – honoring the legendary neighborhood advocate, Jane Jacobs. About 30 people joined us in a 90 minute walk through Kapiolani Park to see the many gorgeous trees and historic sites there. We have designed a walk through Fort DeRussy Armed Forces Reserve and are now working on a special trees and avenues walk through Ala Moana Park and nearby scenic spots. We have barely started to seek supporting members and have not yet opened a bank account so we have a lot to do!

In view of The Outdoor Circle's long history of fighting "visual blight" we have become interested in the very new problem of "light pollution" in Waikiki. You'd be shocked at how many hotels and condominium buildings of all sizes are ablaze each night with unshielded ultra-bright LED lights that are now ruining our essential "dark-sky nights" and making our residential streets resemble prison yards. The new draft Design Guidelines for the Waikiki Special District will address this issue for the first time in new construction but the main problem is existing buildings. What's needed is a coalition of experts and interested parties to join together and come up with solutions, such as light fixture shielding, that might be quite simple.

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Another issue that is being discussed among some in the community (controversial as it may be) is the suggestion to restructure the Honolulu Zoo and transform it into a beautiful tree-filled bird sanctuary, thus saving the huge costs and pollution associated with large animal exhibits that nowadays some consider unsustainable and possibly unethical.

## **Tell us more about the website about and tell us about some of its features?**

We just launched it. It is designed by our talented young colleagues. We are lucky to have a new generation of people getting involved in our work so it isn't really your mother's Outdoor Circle any more. It's very easy to navigate, user friendly and has lots of original content on signage, trees, walks, history and a newsmagazine we call the "Waikiki Whisperer." It's meant to be fun and interesting. Please encourage everyone to view and feel free to feedback and comments to help make it more relevant.

## **As a "malihini" resident, what are some of your impressions about land use (including landscaping and greening of the urban core) that you have of Hawaii in general and Waikiki in particular.**

The hilly geography of Oahu is so stunning for newcomers to see that I often overlook what is just in front of me. The most impressive thing to me is all the giant monkeypod, banyan, mahogany, ironwood and palm trees that take your breath away. Combined with blue ocean all around us there is nowhere else in the world like Honolulu and Waikiki. That being said, many dated condominium towers from the 1970's and 80's are rather ugly, in need of repair and upkeep, and challenge our oft-vaunted *Hawaiian Sense of Place*. Much of the new tower construction is impressive with serious efforts to provide street level greenery and the surprising ease to walk between open lobbies of hotels and shops and nearby public streets, all consistent with polices outlined in the Waikiki Special District design guidelines. The residential areas of Waikiki need some more renewal efforts and street noise is becoming a major

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issue. I live at the Hobron Lane end of Waikiki that has been transformed into a peaceful tree-lined mixed-income community with a real village atmosphere, pocket parks and quiet side streets, despite being opposite the giant Hilton complex and other big hotels.



Paki Avenue – Tunnel of Monkeypod Trees  
<http://www.waikikioutdoorcircle.org/trees.html>

How can we prevent Waikiki from becoming totally overloaded with through traffic? Singapore, another beautiful tropical “city in a park,” has implemented traffic limitations via electronic toll-zones. I wonder if we will need to try that in Waikiki and Honolulu? Among the most serious issue we face,

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however, is the dreaded “urban heat-island effect.” All that concrete and road surface heat up in the middle of the day and drive air temperatures way beyond normal. As our summers get even hotter with climate change, the only solution is to plant many thousands more shade trees. You can easily feel the difference trees make in their cooling effects.

Along those same lines, what’s the point of spending \$100 million to air-condition 1,000 Hawaii schoolrooms when the schools have so few trees shading them? Take a Google satellite view look at Jefferson School right here in Waikiki – most of the classroom buildings are surrounded by barren, treeless land. Unfortunately some city officials, residents and landowners regard trees as a costly nuisance that make a mess with dropped pods and leaves, require too much maintenance and/or pose a safety hazard. There specifically seems to be a war against monkeypod trees in this regard. Really? Our most beloved giant shade trees? Come on. Their upkeep costs are dwarfed by all the environmental benefits they provide.

## **How can our readers get involved with Outdoor Circle Waikiki?**

First take a look at our website to get to know us. Then go on one of our self-directed park walks with the maps we provide. Send us your comments by email. Even better, sign up to become a member, we’d love to have you. If you join us you automatically become a member of our state-wide organization. We could really do with your help and support. For more information or to get involved in our organization, see our contact below:

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