

Don't overbuild Blaisdell complex - Hawaii News - Honolulu

Star-Advertiser

StarAdvertiser.com

Don't overbuild Blaisdell complex

POSTED: 01:30 a.m. HST, Mar 05, 2014

-- ADVERTISEMENT --

-- ADVERTISEMENT --

A quick glance at an aerial photo of the neighborhood makes it obvious that the revitalized "cultural corridor" that Mayor Kirk Caldwell envisions for urban Honolulu is no pie-in-the-sky idea. The strong anchors already exist along Ward Avenue, makai from the Honolulu Museum of Art and its adjacent art school, through Thomas Square Park and across King Street to the Neal S. Blaisdell Center performing arts and exhibition complex, which at 50 years old, is overdue for a major overhaul.

The question is not whether this worthy vision can be achieved, but how to do so in a way that makes the stretch a vibrant entertainment magnet for Oahu residents near and far, and not simply another gaudy commercial district.

It's vital that the Caldwell administration hear from the public about the importance of preserving, improving and expanding open green space in the urban core as it considers public-private partnerships to redevelop the city-owned Blaisdell complex, which sits on 22.4 acres of land that is a few blocks away from what will be Station 20 on the coming mass-transit rail line.

A key opportunity to learn about preliminary plans, and to provide feedback, will occur this Friday, at a public meeting from 9 to 11 a.m. at the Mission Memorial Auditorium, at 500 South King St., next to Honolulu Hale. Residents who care about culture and the arts in Honolulu, and about the transformation of the Ala Moana-Kakaako neighborhoods, should attend.

The Urban Land Institute's Daniel Rose Center for Public Leadership, a Washington, D.C.-based nonprofit, is offering the city free technical assistance as part of its fellowship program encouraging high standards for land use and development expertise the city needs as Oahu's rail construction proceeds and transit-oriented development moves off the drawing board and into real life.

At Friday's meeting, ULI advisers will present preliminary recommendations to create a culture and arts district anchored by a rebuilt Blaisdell Center.

As high-rise after high-rise climbs toward the sky in Kakaako, it's becoming clearer that the best plan would upgrade the Blaisdell's live performance and exhibition spaces and expand the dining and parking facilities, but skip the movie theaters, retail shops and huge residential towers that some developers crave. We need a community arts and culture hub, not another live-in shopping mall.

Civic spaces such as the nearby Honolulu Hale and the state Capitol, surrounded by grass, are becoming invaluable commodities in Honolulu's concrete core. The city-owned Blaisdell complex serves a similar purpose, beyond its obvious role as a venue for a wide variety of entertainment and community events

everything from sold-out concerts to high school graduations to trade shows.

The relatively low-rise complex, with its spaceship-like arena on the corner of Ward Avenue and Kapiolani Boulevard, provides priceless open space in the Ala Moana-Kakaako sector's increasingly crowded urban environment both on the ground and in the air. Iconic coconut palms ringing the center's expansive lawn are a welcome respite amid the area's proliferating skyscrapers.

McKinley High School next door, likewise, gives the neighborhood breathing room. The alma mater of some of Hawaii's most illustrious citizens the late U.S. Sen. Daniel Inouye among them boasts expansive grassy areas that are important not only for the school and its students, but for the surrounding neighbors, providing a peaceful patch of natural grass amid the encroaching "built environment."

So this redevelopment plan presents the opportunity not only to modernize and enlarge the Blaisdell's performance spaces, but also to increase educational opportunities in the arts for Hawaii students; McKinley High could be a natural partner.

A properly planned "cultural corridor" could be the gem of Ala Moana-Kakaako, a pleasant, walkable stretch that complements existing parks and art and educational institutions and attracts crowds to world-class events in state-of-the-art performance halls.

That shouldn't be too much to ask in a city the size of Honolulu, and we shouldn't have to build on every speck of green space to achieve it.

Copyright (c) Honolulu Star-Advertiser