

## Corporate Gain at Taxpayer Expense?

Is Mayor Blangiardi about to spend millions in taxpayer dollars to remove a beloved, historic monument, the Ha'ikū Stairs, to benefit a private company? At an April 13, 2023, town hall, Mayor Blangiardi stated publicly that the City “plan[s] to work with Kualoa Ranch” to move the Stairs there. (Hear it yourself by Googling “Kalani Town Hall” and listen at the 1:19 mark).

In court filings, City attorneys have offered shifting explanations for the Mayor's remarks. They first claimed the Mayor was referring to a *different* staircase. Then, they argued he was only speculating about a possible “aspiration.” Then, they argued that their contract with Nakoia Company, the contractor charged with removing the Stairs, gives Nakoia full control over their disposition, which they claimed put the issue beyond the City's control. However, the City has failed to disclose the full terms of the contract or address possible side-deals cut by City leaders. The City insisted categorically in a public court filing that the “Stair modules are not being installed at Kualoa Ranch” on September 5. As recently as November 3, the City continued to characterize any suggestions that the Stairs might end up at Kualoa as “absurd.” However, on December 5, the City admitted in court that there “may be” an agreement to transfer the Ha'ikū Stairs to Kualoa.

Essential questions remain unanswered: Why has the City structured a deal whereby taxpayers bear all the costs, while Nakoia and Kualoa seem to realize all the upsides? Rather than selling the Stairs, the City proposes to spend more than \$4 million of taxpayer money to remove the Stairs from their current location. However, by its own admission, the City seems to have given Nakoia the right to resell the removed modules. As such, taxpayers would realize a single cent from the Kualoa giveaway. Kualoa Ranch will gain a priceless public asset delivered up at enormous public expense, and the taxpayers who funded the Stairs' 1942 construction and who paid a further \$1 million in City-funded repairs to restore the Stairs for public recreational use in 2003 will be left stuck with paying for the removal tab.

Also unanswered: Why do the Stairs only become safe when installed on Kualoa's mountain? Despite a record of zero deaths and zero serious injuries in 80 years, Mayor Blangiardi and other City leaders have long insisted the Stairs are unsafe for public use. The Mayor has dismissed community-driven plans to maintain the Stairs in their current location as unworkable, despite the declared interest of major tour operators such as Roberts Hawaii as well as a bevy of local nonprofit groups in managing them. Apparently, the Stairs are only unsafe for locals to use while at Ha'ikū Valley. Once moved to Kualoa, they will magically become safe for tourists to pay top dollars to climb the world-famous “Stairway to Heaven.”

Finally, what role did Kualoa Ranch and Nakoia play in the City's decision to remove the Stairs in the first place? Kualoa Ranch has made no secret of its interest in acquiring the Stairs. It declared its aim “to put them back up on one of its mountains” in 2020 and reaffirmed this interest this month (December 2023). Nakoia was the sole bidder on the removal contract. Did Kualoa's commercial interests influence City leaders? Did Nakoia's?

For the time being, these questions remain unanswered. The City continues to stonewall and deny any involvement in the Kualoa transfer. Indeed, City attorneys filed a legal motion seeking to prevent the Friends of Ha'ikū Stairs (FHS) from even questioning the Mayor and City leaders about Kualoa. Nothing to see here; just move along . . .

All this comes despite mounting evidence casting doubt on the case for removal. The Kaneohe Neighborhood Board (KNB) has gone door to door speaking to residents in the impacted areas and learned that trespassing has reduced significantly in recent years. The KNB has also documented that the majority of Ha'ikū residents support preserving the Stairs under managed access—as does the majority of residents island-wide. It has passed two resolutions supporting managed access and opposing removal. Moreover, Mayor Blangiardi's claims that the Stairs are unsafe are belied by a record of zero lawsuits, deaths or serious injuries—something the City's own environmental impact study confirmed in 2019.

We don't have to do this. FHS has a community stewardship plan to manage the Stairs in their current location in a safe, and responsible manner with adjacent landowners' support. This plan builds on extensive work done by the City itself during the previous administration. It offers access that bypasses residential neighborhoods, ends trespassing, and eliminates public liability. It would cost the City nothing and generate jobs and revenues that benefit the local community. Asked multiple times, Mayor Blangiardi and City leaders have never explained why the Friends' plan won't work or why they refuse to heed the public's will. They continue to insist, contrary to evidence, that the Stairs are unsafe. Oahu voters should form their own judgments.

By contrast, moving the Stairs to Kualoa is a poor substitute. The Stairs modules are contoured to the ridge at Ha'ikū. As a result, they won't fit on Kualoa's mountain. The lower elevations there also mean that only part of the Stairs could be used at best. Moving them will thus lead to a mutilated, truncated facsimile of the original.

Tourists lured by the "Stairway to Heaven" mystique may not know or care, and Kualoa can safely profit from their ignorance. Yet, moving the Stairs would also detach them from their historic links to Ha'ikū Valley. Doing so dishonors the heroic wartime effort the Navy made to build the Stairs there as part of a revolutionary radio transmitter whose unprecedented range provided a crucial edge that helped win the War in the Pacific. The Stairs also played a role in the later-developed Omega Station technology—an equally pathbreaking precursor to GPS. They have since become a beloved fixture of Windward O'ahu—offering a one-of-a-kind hiking experience encompassing some most stunning scenery on the planet. Removing the Stairs from Ha'ikū would erase the myriad memories that generations of island residents have cherished in this place—climbing the Stairs on scouting trips, as ohana outings, after graduating high school, even as a venue to propose marriage. Why should tourists get exclusive enjoyment of something that belongs to all of us?

Removal of the Stairs will cost millions. It would wreak untold environmental harm on a federally protected habitat populated by critically endangered species while burdening residents with two years of helicopter overflights. The idea that this whole project might serve to enrich a private company without undergoing any scrutiny or disclosure under Hawai'i environmental law demands question. That the City appears poised to sign away an iconic public treasure in a secret backroom deal makes the Kualoa transfer even more suspect.

If the Department of the Interior were to take down the Statue of Liberty with taxpayer dollars only for it to be resold by the contractor to Disneyland, the public would be outraged. The evidence suggests such a deal may be in the works right in our own backyard. The public should demand answers and hold City leaders accountable.

*Friends of Ha'ikū Stairs is a Kaneohe-based nonprofit organization that led volunteer work trips to maintain the Stairs for decades and continues its mission to safeguard the historic "Stairway to Heaven" and the surrounding environment.*