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Posted on: Tuesday, December 23, 2003

## DRIVE TIME

# Who will run with architect's grand plan for Waikiki?



By [Mike Leidemann](#)  
Advertiser Transportation Writer

No one ever accused Charles Palumbo of worrying about the details.

So when you see the transportation vision Palumbo has dreamed up for Waikiki, you don't bother to ask questions about how it's going to be done politically or who is going to pay for it.

Instead, you just sit back and marvel at the way his mind works.

In the Waikiki of the future, Palumbo envisions a monorail and ocean-going ferries combining to bring tourists from the airport to the beach, via an ocean route. From there, smaller shuttle boats will take them up and down the Ala Wai Canal, past spectacular new bridges named for Hawaiian royalty.

Drivers and pedestrians, meanwhile, will have more space for themselves, thanks to widened sidewalks and streets. Dramatic changes in traffic plans will make it easier for them to circulate through the area and into the community beyond.

Palumbo, an architect who worked with the late George Kanahale to develop the highly successful Waikiki Historic Trail, has begun showing his well-thought-out presentation to lawmakers and business groups around town, trying not so much to promote any one idea but to just get a dialogue

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started.

He knows that big changes take a long time to bring about. He figures he won't live long enough to see many of them through.

That doesn't stop Palumbo, who was born on Lana'i and shuttled between there and Honolulu in his early days, from dreaming. Let the others worry about how it's going to be done, he says. For him, the important thing is talking about the things that get change started.

"My job is to put the discussion on the table, and maybe sometime in the next century kids will recognize that this was how it all began," said Palumbo, who says he specializes in grand designs and tends to leave actual construction details to others. "This is a vision for the next 100 years, but if we don't take bold steps now, we'll all get lost in the dust."

While some businesses and lawmakers have shrugged off his ideas as high-apple-pie-in-the-sky dreaming, there are those who appreciate his breadth of view.

"Somebody has got to think like that," said Cheryl Soon, the city's director of transportation services. "If you didn't have visionaries, there might never have been an automobile or any overseas flights."

Soon, who also oversees the city's Waikiki Livable Community Initiative, said many of Palumbo's ideas go far beyond the basics of transportation and could help transform Waikiki for residents and tourists, alike.

"You need folks like that who aren't afraid to be out on the edge and who aren't afraid to be a little fanciful," she said. "They're part of the spectrum of improving society as we go along."

Palumbo knows that the political and economic realities of today are against him. In his presentations, he emphasizes the potential that lies in thinking big and avoids getting bogged down in small matters.

His proposals draw broad smiles and unbelieving shakes of the head. Every step of his plan, though, makes sense on some level.

- He can show how shaving just a few feet here and there off Waikiki buildings and sidewalk overhangs can create a better traffic flow on Kuhio Avenue. (Never mind the cost of "selective condemnation" or redesigning existing buildings that cramp the area today).
- He can show breathtaking visions of a what a tourist's first glimpse of Diamond Head might be like from the water, rather seeing it through the

industrial haze of Nimitz Highway. "It would be love at first sight ....," he says.

Palumbo's plans call for building a monorail that links the airport to a ferry terminal at Ke'ehi Lagoon while visitors' bags are being transported by truck to their hotel.

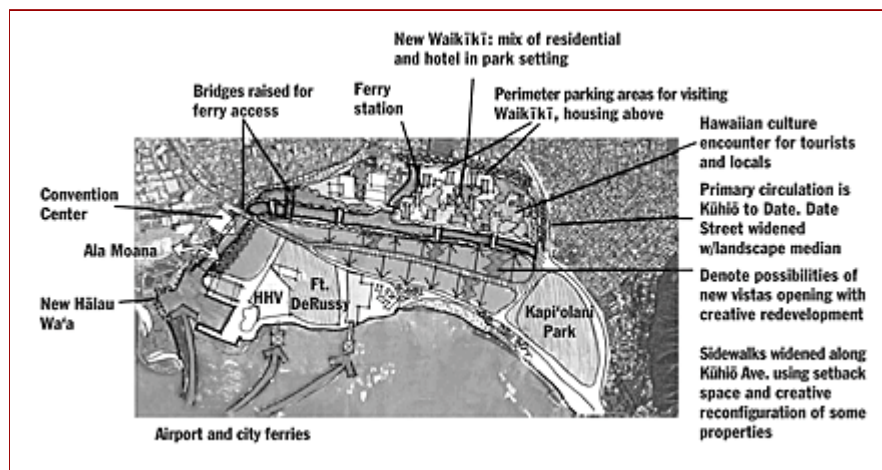
- Once they arrive at two or three selected Waikiki docking areas, the tourists would then transfer to waiting canal boats stationed near Magic Island for a trip up the cleaned-up Ala Wai.
- Meanwhile, what's now the Ala Wai Golf Course is turned into what he calls "New Waikiki," a mix of residential and hotels development in a park-like setting. The primary driving pattern to get from New to Old Waikiki is a new loop that includes Kūhiō and Kapahulu avenues and McCully and Date streets.

Considering the hullabaloo that was raised when former Gov. Ben Cayetano tried to move the Ala Wai Golf Course, Palumbo knows all the critics who are going to emerge when they see his far grander vision of the area. He's undeterred.

"The reality is that it's going to happen — someday," he says. "All I have is the ideas. I cogitate all day. I'm not sure how it will all come about. I just know it's just going to take a lot of moxie and a lot of politicians thinking in a new way."

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