



UNIVERSITY OF HAWAII SYSTEM

‘ŌNAEHANA KULANUI O HAWAII

Legislative Testimony

Hō'ike Mana'o I Mua O Ka 'Aha'ōlelo

Testimony Presented Before the
Senate Committee on Water, Land, Culture and the Arts
Wednesday, April 8, 2026 at 1:05 p.m.

By

Denise Eby Konan, Dean
College of Social Sciences

and

Darren Lerner, Director
Sea Grant College Program

and

Vassilis Syrmos, PhD
Interim Provost
University of Hawai'i at Mānoa

SCR 94/SR 89 – ENDORSING WAIKIKI AS A WORLD SURFING RESERVE

Chair Lee, Vice Chair Inouye, and Members of the Committee:

The College of Social Sciences (CSS) and Sea Grant College Program (Hawai'i Sea Grant) strongly support the intent of SCR 94/SR 89, which recognizes Waikīkī as a World Surfing Reserve.

Waikīkī is not only an iconic cultural and recreational landscape, but also a cornerstone of Hawai'i's visitor economy. Its world-renowned surf breaks, beaches and coastal ecosystems are intrinsically linked to the economic vitality of the region. The health of these natural resources directly underpins the livelihoods of local businesses, supports employment and sustains the broader economic resilience of the State. As such, there is a clear and compelling social, cultural and economic rationale for protecting and stewarding the environmental systems that make Waikīkī both unique and globally significant.

Designation as a World Surfing Reserve would formally acknowledge Waikīkī's exceptional environmental, cultural and recreational value while elevating public awareness of the growing threats facing its coastal resources. These include coastal erosion, sea level rise, increased storm impacts and ongoing pressures from urban development and heavy use. Recognizing Waikīkī through this designation provides an important platform to highlight these challenges and to promote proactive, science-informed management strategies. Our understanding is that designation as a Reserve does not necessarily trigger new environmental or commercial regulations but instead requires the formation of a stewardship committee and subsequent community-based management plan.

Equally important, this recognition would help strengthen and formalize community-based stewardship. It offers a mechanism to enhance collaboration among local stakeholders, practitioners, cultural leaders and resource managers, fostering a shared commitment to protecting Waikīkī's natural and cultural heritage. By aligning conservation efforts with community values and local knowledge, this initiative can support more effective, inclusive and adaptive management approaches.

CSS has formed a research- and advisory-based Surf Culture and Heritage Hui (Surf Hui), which supports surfing heritage initiatives in Hawai'i. These initiatives include legislative, cultural and historical impacts, and policy work connected to surfing as a Native Hawaiian cultural practice.

This Surf Hui will give CSS a formal platform to organize research, community engagement and strategic advising around surfing as culture and heritage. As this resolution formerly endorses recognition of Waikīkī as a World Surfing Reserve, the Surf Hui could complement the effort by advancing the historical, cultural, social and policy research aspects needed to support national and international recognition of surfing in Hawai'i.

Work has already begun on producing a small set of visible, useful products that establish credibility and support future funding or legislative collaboration. These objectives include:

Phase 1: Developing the organization and framework. To build membership, refine the scope and prepare a foundational background brief on the history and culture of surfing in Hawai'i.

Phase 2: Researching and consultation. To convene practitioner and community conversations, review archival and scholarly sources, and identify major themes, risks and heritage documentation priorities.

Phase 3: Obtaining public products and policy support. To deliver a white paper or issue a brief, policy memo for state leadership, and roadmap for future heritage-oriented research, documentation and advisory work. Potential deliverables include a surfing heritage background report, a bibliography and archive map, one or more community-engagement roundtables, testimony or policy support materials as requested, and a strategic short memo outlining future opportunities for cultural heritage, research and public engagement.

Housing the Surf Hui in CSS would be a natural fit. The College could provide an interdisciplinary home for the historical, cultural, policy and community dimensions of surfing, while serving as a bridge to other UH units. CSS brings institutional credibility, research infrastructure and public-facing policy orientation for a group that is both scholarly and applied.

In practice, CSS would provide administrative coordination, meeting support, communications assistance and a platform for collaborative grant development. The College would help ensure that the Surfing Hui's work products are useful beyond the university to legislators, cultural organizations, schools, local communities and the broader public. By convening the proposed team and engaging additional community voices as needed, the Surfing Hui can become a credible institutional home for research and advisory work related to surfing as one of Hawai'i's most visible and culturally significant practices.

Hawai'i Sea Grant is a formidable partner in this endeavor. Its mission is to provide integrated research, extension and educational activities that increase understanding and use of ocean and coastal resources of the Hawaiian and Pacific Islands, and support the informed personal, policy and management decisions that are integral to realizing this vision. Hawai'i Sea Grant is part of a national network of 34 university-based programs associated with the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration that promote better understanding, conversation and use of coastal resources.

In summary, this resolution represents a meaningful step toward safeguarding the environmental integrity, cultural significance and economic sustainability of Waikīkī for future generations. CSS and Hawai'i Sea Grant respectfully ask for your support.

Thank you for the opportunity to submit this testimony.



Testimony Presented Before the
Senate Committee on Water, Land, Culture and the Arts

Wednesday, April 8, 2026; 1:05 pm

By
Rick Egged, President
Waikiki Beach Special Improvement District Association

SCR 94/SR 89 – ENDORSING WAIKIKI AS A WORLD SURFING RESERVE

Chair Lee, Vice Chair Inouye and Members of the Committee:

The Waikiki Beach Special Improvement District Association (WBSIDA) supports House Concurrent Resolution (SCR) 94 and House Resolution (SR) 89, which recognize Waikiki as a World Surfing Reserve.

Waikiki's world-renowned surf breaks and coastal ecosystems are foundational to both its cultural significance and economic vitality, demonstrating the clear connection between environmental health and long-term economic resilience. Protecting these natural resources is essential to sustaining the livelihoods, visitor industry, and community identity that depend on them. Designation as a World Surfing Reserve would formally acknowledge Waikiki's exceptional environmental, cultural, and recreational value while elevating public awareness of the growing threats facing its coastal resources.

This designation would elevate awareness of the increasing threats to Waikiki's coastal environment, while providing a framework to strengthen community-based stewardship. Designation as a World Surfing Reserve does not automatically trigger new environmental or commercial regulations but instead facilitates the formation of a stewardship committee and subsequent community-based management plan. Recognizing Waikiki as a World Surfing Reserve can help align stakeholders, support informed management, and advance a shared vision for protecting these vital natural and cultural resources for future generations.

Equally important, this recognition would help strengthen and formalize community-based stewardship. It offers a mechanism to enhance collaboration among local stakeholders, practitioners, cultural leaders, and resource managers, fostering a shared commitment to protecting Waikiki's natural and cultural heritage. By aligning conservation efforts with community values and local knowledge, this initiative can support more effective, inclusive, and adaptive management approaches. The WBSIDA supports the intent of these measures and looks forward to continued discussion on the details.



Testimony in Support of H.R. 98 and S.R. 89 (WITH COMMENTS)

(Endorsing Waikīkī as a World Surfing Reserve)

Aloha Chair, Vice Chair, and Members,

My name is Kate Thompson, Director of Surfparking.org, and I am testifying in support of H.R. 98 and S.R. 89, with comments, which recognize Waikīkī as a World Surfing Reserve.

These resolutions rightly acknowledge that Waikīkī is not just a surf destination, but the birthplace of modern surfing and a living cultural landscape where Native Hawaiian traditions, community, and ocean stewardship continue to thrive. Surf breaks such as Canoes, Queens, Bowls, and Rock Piles are among the most iconic in the world. They are used daily by residents and visitors alike, but more importantly, they remain deeply embedded in the lives of local families and communities.

Surfing in Waikīkī represents something rare and invaluable. It is:

- Freely accessible to the public
- A natural and sustainable way to maintain physical and mental health
- A social and intergenerational gathering space, where kūpuna, keiki, and families connect daily
- A living cultural practice rooted in Native Hawaiian knowledge and identity

Unlike county swimming pools and other built recreational facilities, the ocean is a self-sustaining public resource—requiring no admission fees, no programming, and minimal infrastructure.

Even where lifeguards are present, access remains open and free to the public.

These surf breaks provide immense public value at virtually no cost to the State—sustaining health, culture, and community every single day.

And importantly—you cannot take a surfboard on the bus.

Reasonable access to nearby parking is essential for residents who rely on these breaks as part of their daily lives.

PLEASE REMEMBER TO HONOR THE LONG LEGACY OF SURF ACCESS ADVOCACY, ALREADY PRESENT IN HAWAI'I

It is important to recognize that Hawai'i is not only the birthplace of surfing, but also the birthplace of organized, community-based surf access advocacy.

Leaders such as John Kelly Jr. in the early 1970s, the Downing family, Friends of Kewalos, Free Access Hawai'i, Save Our Surf, and the Surfrider Foundation have worked across decades to protect coastal access at the Board of Land and Natural Resources and at the State of Hawai'i legislative levels.

Educational and advocacy efforts—such as those supported by the Surfing Education Association (<https://www.surfingeducationassociation.org>)—continue to carry forward this legacy, reinforcing the connection between surf culture, public access, and stewardship.

This history makes clear: protecting surf breaks has always included protecting access to them.

COMMUNITY PROTECTION OF SURF ACCESS PARKING

In January 2023, the community organized a large public rally to protect surf access and parking in Waikīkī. That gathering reflected a deeply held understanding: access to the ocean is fundamental to life in Hawai'i.

Following that rally, the Department of Boating and Ocean Recreation (DOBOR) publicly stated that they had “no immediate plans” to eliminate free parking at the Ala Wai Small Boat Harbor.

However, this assurance conflicted with ongoing efforts. For years, DOBOR has advanced proposals to privatize and monetize harbor lands, including parking areas historically used by surfers and the general public.

Within approximately six months of that public statement, DOBOR brought forward a proposal to eliminate or significantly reduce free parking at Ala Wai Small Boat Harbor, which appeared in materials for the November 2023 Board of Land and Natural Resources (BLNR) meeting.

That November 2023 BLNR meeting was subsequently cancelled due to a potential Sunshine Law violation, raising concerns about transparency, public process, and accountability.

When the matter returned, the proposal to eliminate or reduce free parking was no longer included—without clear explanation to the public as to what had changed or whether similar actions may be pursued in the future.

WHY THIS MATTERS

These resolutions recognize Waikīkī as a World Surfing Reserve because of its:

- Global cultural significance
- Unique environmental and surf conditions
- Strong and active community stewardship

However, recognition should be accompanied by continued commitment to public access.

ACCESS IS PRESERVATION.

We look forward to working collaboratively and sharing community knowledge to ensure that preserving Waikīkī as a World Surfing Reserve includes protecting public access—because access is preservation.

CONCLUSION

Supporting H.R. 98 and S.R. 89 is not only about recognition—it is also an opportunity to reaffirm shared responsibilities.

This includes:

- Protecting and maintaining public access
- Ensuring parking remains affordable and available for ocean users
- Upholding transparency and accountability in decision-making
- Avoiding the privatization of public shoreline resources

Waikīkī's surf breaks are living spaces of culture, health, and connection that serve the people of Hawai'i every day—at virtually no cost.

Please pass these resolutions while continuing to support policies that protect not only the waves, but access to them.

Mahalo for the opportunity to testify.

Kate Thompson

Director, Surfparking.org

808-383-3334