**Why Removal of the Stairs Should Be Halted**

The Haʻikū Stairs are an **iconic and historic landmark**, both unique and irreplaceable. Deservedly known as “the Stairway to Heaven,” they provide unparalleled access to one of the most magnificent natural settings in the world. Generations of residents island-wide have treasured the Stairs.[[1]](#footnote-1) It would be a travesty to destroy them without at least exploring the alternatives—which the City has failed to do.

The Haʻikū Stairs are also **one of the safest hikes on the island**—zero deaths, zero serious injuries, and zero lawsuits in 80 years.  Under Coast Guard, the Stairs were open for years, providing safe, legal public access with no problems, no complaints. Trespassing only became a problem when the Omega Station closed, the land was subdivided, and the City closed the Stairs “temporarily” while it negotiated access.

Since then, the Stairway to Heaven has been **a story of government failure**. The City’s inability to provide for legal access predictably spurred illegal trespassing, frustrating both neighbors and hikers. Finally, in 2020, the Caldwell administration transferred the Stairs to the Department of Parks and Recreation and solicited bids to reopen the Stairs to the public. Fourteen vendors submitted proposals. They were never acted on as the Caldwell administration simply ran out of time.

A few months later, the new administration inserted a one-line item in the 100-page budget for $1 million to remove the stairs. This 180-degree reversal in policy came without any public discussion or debate.  When this surreptitious budget item was discovered, a public outcry ensued.

In past two years, more than 5000 people submitted public testimony. **Well over 90% of comments favored keeping the Stairs**.[[2]](#footnote-2) Despite this overwhelming demonstration of public sentiment, the City Council voted for removal.  This course defies logic. The City has failed to explore alternative solutions, failed to budget appropriately or transparently, and left serious concerns unanswered regarding environmental risks. This is ***not*** the way public policy should be done—especially when a majority of the public wants to reopen the Stairs, not destroy them.[[3]](#footnote-3)

The aim of the Kāneʻohe Neighborhood Board resolution is to get the City to take a pause and do what it has failed to do so far: (a) properly evaluate the risks, challenges, and costs of removal; and (b) properly explore managed access alternatives that would both preserve Haiku Stairs and protect residents in Haʻikū Valley.

**Why This Issue Merits Action by the Nu‘unu-Punchbowl Neighborhood Board**

Four reasons:

1. The Haʻikū Stairs are an iconic landmark valued both by visitors and residents *island-wide*. They were built as part of a top secret, pathbreaking radio station that contributed directly to winning World War II. Together with other historic sites in Haʻikū Valley, they could easily form a world-heritage site or national park monument.  This is ***not*** a purely local issue.

2. The City has **rushed into removal** without adequate planning. The City’s own planning documents identify numerous challenges, risks, and legal obstacles that the City has not even begun to address. A new environmental study is needed. There are multiple endangered species known to live in the vicinity of the Stairs, which could require costly mitigation and remediation.

The destabilizing effects of ripping the 80-year-old structure off this fragile unstable ridgeline need to be dealt with. Otherwise, invasive species will propagate in the denuded hillside, crowding out native plants and soil runoff will threaten the downstream watershed leading into Kāneʻohe Bay.  And there are serious questions whether removal of the Stairs will even solve the intended problem.[[4]](#footnote-4)

3. Similarly, the City’s budgeting for removal remains inadequate and nontransparent.

Budgeted costs appear to be grossly underestimated compared with earlier estimates. In 2014, City itself estimated costs of removal at $4-5 million. Today’s figure could easily reach $10 million. The City itself has no clue; its budget is based on fictitious numbers.[[5]](#footnote-5) In short, the **City is rushing heedlessly into a budgetary black hole**.  And taxpayers island-wide will be stuck footing the bill.

4. The City has acted in a **fundamentally nontransparent, undemocratic** fashion. Neighborhood boards embody the grass-roots voice of the community. Neighborhood board resolutions hold the City leadership accountable for its actions and call attention to the shortcomings of the current course.

**What About Trespassing? Hasn’t the Community Suffered Enough?**

Trespassing is a serious problem that urgently needs to be addressed. However, as noted, the root cause of trespassing is government failure to provide legal access. Nor will removal of the Stairs make trespassing go away. The Stairway to Heaven is internationally renowned. Images of the panoramic vistas it affords are widely promoted on social media. Removal of the Stairs will not end the pent-up demand to climb the ridge. Moreover, the City’s plans to remove only the top structure of the Stairs modules while leaving the anchor pillars in place would provide a ready-made scaffolding to do so. Even after removal, this would lure daredevils to attach ropes and climb the ridge and invite trespassing to get there.

Furthermore, the Haʻikū Valley community itself remains divided on the Stairs issue. Many residents have either climbed the Stairs themselves or would like to. Doing so forms a rite of passage for many neighborhood kids. Despite the harm and suffering that trespassing has caused, many residents would like to find a solution to end trespassing ***and*** keep the Stairs in place. (See the attached testimony from former resident, Dylan Armstrong, which expresses such views well).

In the long run, managed access provides the best solution to eliminate trespassing and manage the Stairs issues responsibly. Managed access is working at Hana‘uma Bay and Diamond Head; it would work just as well for Haʻikū Stairs. As noted, there was virtually no trespassing during the Coast Guard years when legal access was available.

That said, there is much more that could be done to control trespassing in the interim. Here too, the government has failed the community and allowed the problem to fester. The City wastes money on ill-designed security measures that could be redirected more effectively. The Kāneʻohe Neighborhood Board has recently formed a public task force to address the trespassing issue through community-driven solutions. Thus, help is on the way, and trespassing can be dealt with through both short and long-term solutions without the need for the Stairs’ removal.

1. The Stairs are not just valued by hikers, but also by scouting troops, educators, and native Hawaiian gatherers, and even first responders. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. For example, see attached testimony from Dylan Armstrong. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. A recent poll confirmed majority support for reopening the Stairs under managed access. <https://www.haikustairs.org/post/nonprofit-releases-survey-in-last-ditch-effort-to-save-haiku-stairs-on-oahu>. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. The Stairway to Heaven provide an exceedingly safe way to reach the summit. They have metal stairs and handrails on both sides. They cause little or no erosion, and it is impossible to get lost while climbing them. Removing the very safe Stairs will increase use of the deteriorating and much more dangerous Moanalua Valley Trail. This will result in more injuries, more rescues (at taxpayer expense), and more erosion. Already, there have been seven Hawaii Fire Department rescues from the Moanalua trail in past year alone (!). [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. We know this because FHS filed an UIPA request asking for the basis for their $1.3 estimate--which it turns out is based solely on a questionable $1 million helicopter cost based on outdated prices. It does not even begin to take into account the many other costs of removal, permitting, environmental remediation, and revegetation.  [↑](#footnote-ref-5)