

[Honolulu](#)

Denby Fawcett: Popular Diamond Head Swimming Hole To Be Demolished

The state land board voted to tear down the decades-old breakwater at Shangri La that has been the scene of many injuries.

By [Denby Fawcett](#)

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The Board of Land and Natural Resources on Friday gave the state approval to demolish a large lava breakwater fronting Diamond Head's Shangri La Museum of Islamic Art, Culture and Design.

The vote was six in favor with one member abstaining.

Demolition crews are expected to begin dismantling the breakwater late next year after getting the necessary permits. The estimated price for the demolition was unclear but in the discussion it ranged from to \$1.8 million to \$5 million with the Doris Duke Foundation promising \$1 million to offset the cost.

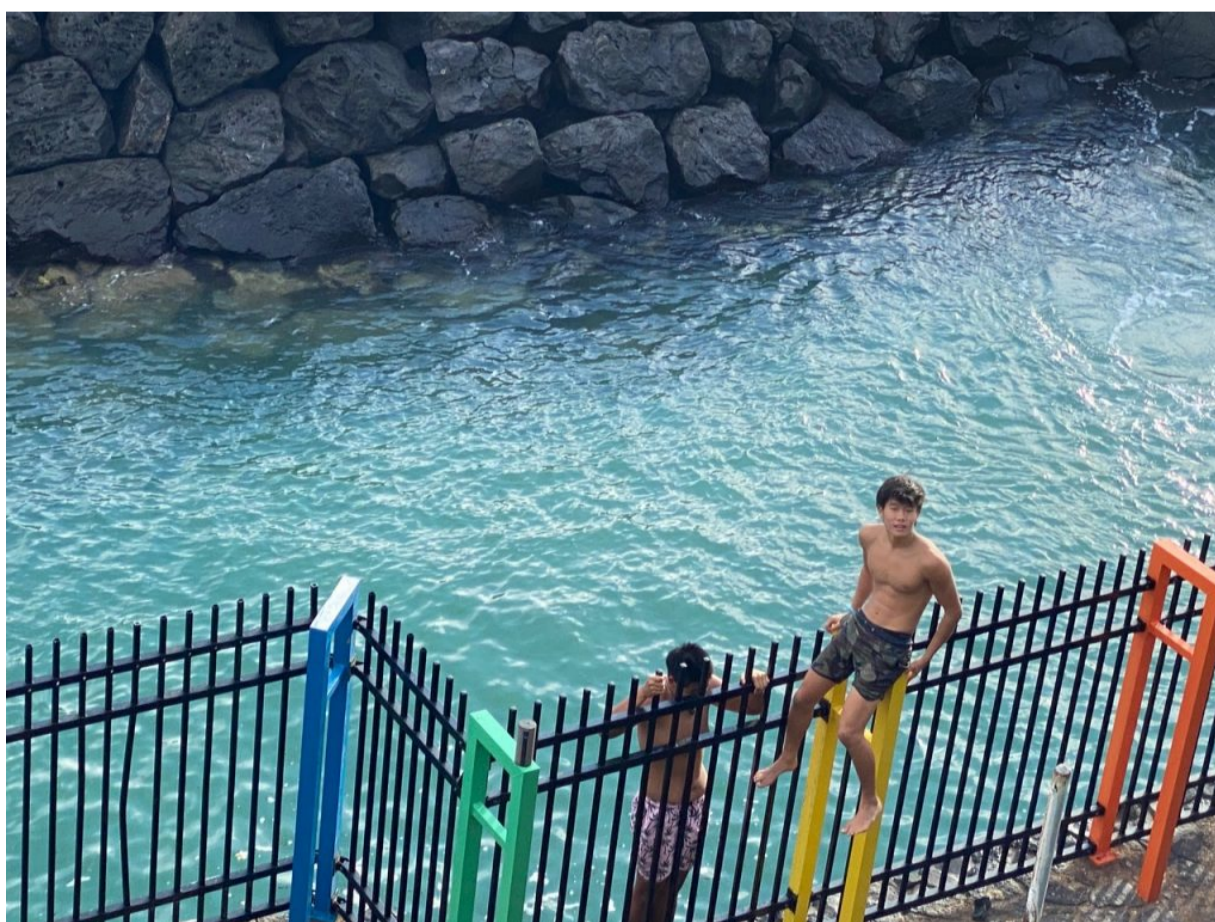
State planners say the dismantled lava boulders from the breakwater will be relocated to create a more natural shoreline in front of the Shangri La seawall. The wall serves as an access path for the public. The boulders will be repositioned in the water in front of the wall to discourage jumping into the basin, which is dangerous.

The state requested permission from the board to dismantle the historic breakwater for liability reasons.

Over the years, young daredevils who love swimming in the harbor created by the breakwater have seriously injured themselves by diving headfirst into the shallow former boat basin. Three teenagers in separate diving incidents were rendered quadriplegic.

Former Hawaii Land and Natural Resources Chair Suzanne Case testified at Friday's hearing to urge that the seawall be dismantled.

"This is the right thing to do," Case said. "I know people feel strongly about this place. It is beautiful, it is historic ... but sometimes you have to do the hard thing, to make the right choice to save people's lives."



Young swimmers at the harbor basin in front of Doris Duke's former Honolulu home, Shangri La. (Denby Fawcett/Civil Beat/2023)

The breakwater was constructed in 1937 by tobacco heiress Doris Duke to make a harbor for her two boats and a protected swimming place for herself and her guests at her mansion called Shangri La.

Duke willed her Diamond Head home to be turned into an Islamic arts museum after her death in 1993.

This is the third time an appeal for demolition has been made to BLNR. The board in two separate votes in 2018 rejected a practically identical application from the Doris Duke Foundation, which operates the museum.

DLNR made the current application because it formally accepted ownership and liability for the harbor improvements and submerged lands in a quit-claim deed from the Doris Duke Foundation in September 2018. That was despite BLNR being advised by staff not to take on the liability for the taxpayers of Hawaii.

Critics of the dismantling project said removing the breakwater protecting the basin will actually make the basin more dangerous for swimmers because there will be a much lower barrier to keep out large ocean swells in high tides.

The breakwater was almost 8 feet above sea level. The new more natural barrier will be only up to 3 feet tall.

“People who come to swim here are going to get hurt. Big waves will wash over the new lowered wall. The waves will wipe out the basin. You are going to be handing plaintiffs’ attorneys tailor-made cases,” said Bill Saunders, an attorney and Black Point resident who has lived in the area for 60 years.

Diamond Head resident Fred Fong, a longtime opponent of the demolition of the breakwater, said the estimated cost to dismantle it in 2016 was \$2.5 million but with today’s soaring inflation the cost to taxpayers will likely be more than \$5 million.

He said a far less expensive solution would be to reconfigure the fence fronting the basin so nobody could stand on it to jump into the water.

Surfer Keone Downing, a former land board member, was critical of the demolition saying it is an impossible task for government to try to dismantle every potentially dangerous site in Hawaii.

“Where would you begin? The Kapahulu Groin? China Walls? There will always be daredevils,” he said.

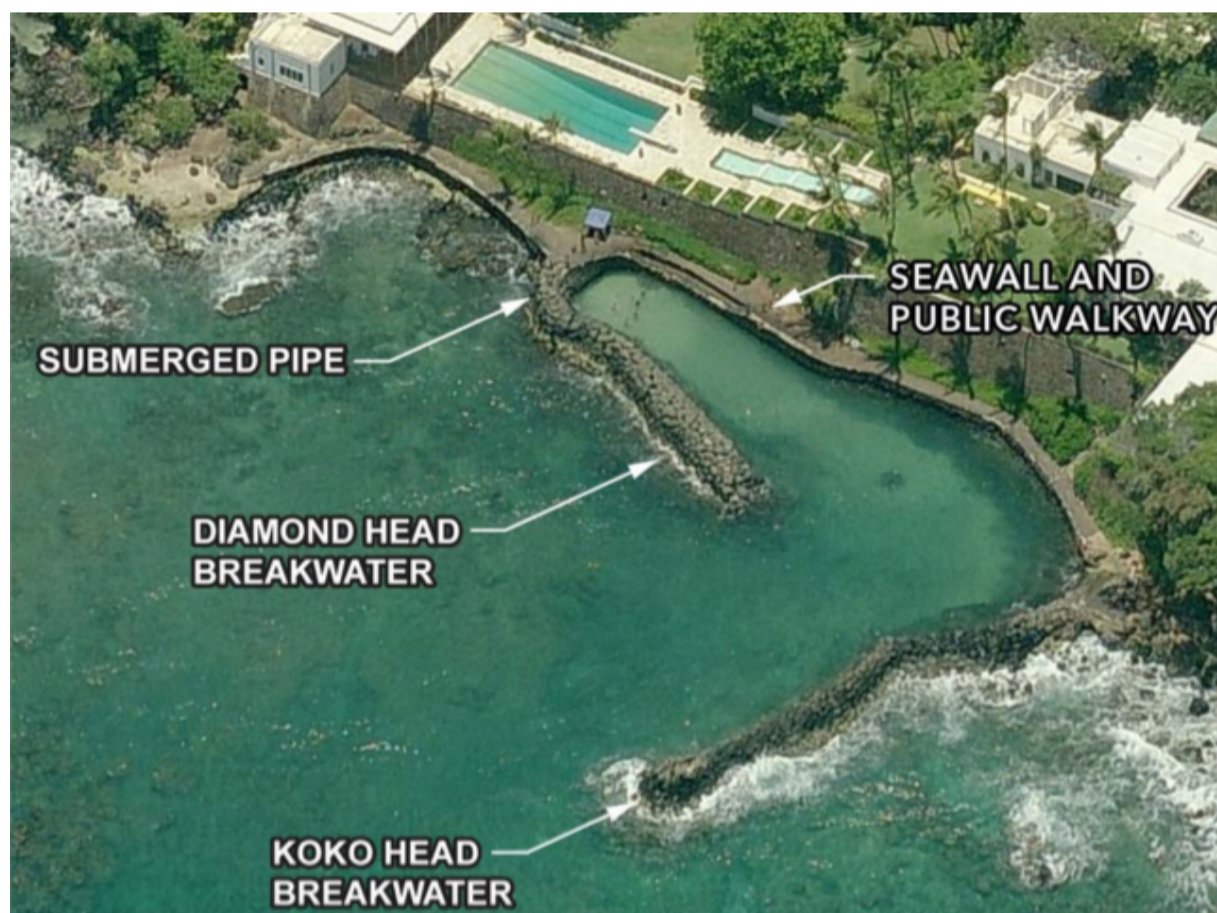
Attorney David Louie spoke in support of dismantling the breakwater.

“This is about safety and protecting the public,” he said. “That’s the job of the state. We should protect the public.”

Louie was Hawaii’s attorney general under Gov. Neil Abercrombie from 2011 to 2014.

“Kids are always going to jump off the wall,” Louie said. “Someone is going to get hurt and there will always be an enterprising attorney to sue saying you should have done this, you should have don’t that for protection. Signs and fences have not worked. That’s been proven.”

Louie was retained by the Doris Duke Foundation to provide legal advice on safety issues and address legal points raised by opponents who tried to stop the state from dismantling the breakwater.



A screenshot to illustrate potential alterations at the Shangri La boat harbor. The Koko Head breakwater would be retained, only the Diamond Head breakwater would be demolished. (Doris Duke Foundation)

The Waialae-Kahala Neighborhood Board passed two different resolutions in 2018 and 2021 opposing the destruction of the breakwater. It was also opposed by the Diamond Head Neighborhood Board. A petition was signed by 1,400 people to call for retaining the historic breakwater.

A key concern now will be how big an effect this will have on the surrounding oceanfront land with the removal of a historic breakwater that has been in place for 85 years.

Attorney Saunders says he is greatly disappointed by the board's decision.

“I think there are legal challenges still available when the state applies for other necessary permits to do the demolition including a permit needed from the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers,” he said.

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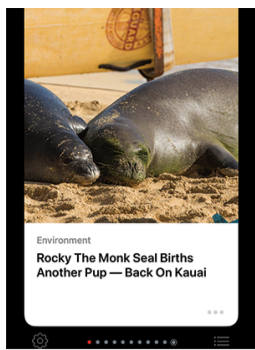
Denby Fawcett is a longtime Hawaii television and newspaper journalist, who grew up in Honolulu. Her book, *Secrets of Diamond Head: A History and Trail Guide* is available on Amazon. Opinions are the author's own and do not necessarily reflect Civil Beat's views.



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