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Steve Mechler: The Outdoor Circle's president works to preserve Hawaii's natural beauty

By [Maureen O'Connell](#)

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DENNIS ODA / DODA@STARADVERTISER.COM

Steve Mechler

Founded in 1912, The Outdoor Circle's plantings in public places began that year with 28 monkeypod trees in Aala Park, bounded by Nuuanu Stream and Chinatown, followed by bougainvillea vines along the canal on River Street. Then came flowering trees placed on Thomas Square's side streets; mahogany in Waikiki; and royal palms in Manoa — among other

chlorophyll-rich beautification.

Over the years, the nonprofit expanded its efforts to include a successful campaign to ban billboards, and projects such as view plane preservation and tree advocacy. Recently, TOC's advocacy turned to leafy Manoa Marketplace, in support of an appeal to retain monkeypods.

Last fall, Alexander & Baldwin, which owns the property, initiated plans to remove seven trees and relocate two because their roots were breaking up asphalt in the center's parking lot, creating what it said was a safety hazard. In January, an opposition petition campaign launched by a group called Manoa Alliance drew more than 19,000 signatures and prompted others to get involved.

The Outdoor Circle drafted an "alternative development scheme" for a landscape green belt. "It did what it was intended to do, and that was to allow the Alexander & Baldwin team to rethink how they could incorporate larger planters into their parking layout and to save the monkeypod trees in place," said Steve Mechler, president of The Outdoor Circle and a longtime landscape architect.

Born and raised in Hawaii, Mechler heads his own Kaneohe-based company, which handles designs ranging from residential properties and office complexes to hotels and resorts. He has served on TOC's board for more than two decades.

The final Manoa Marketplace layout, he said, calls for 16 monkeypods to stay put, one to be relocated due to interference with drain inlet, and one new tree to be planted. "That is quite a win-win for all involved," Mechler said.

"It was very gratifying to see how all the parties were able to reach a consensus of opinion and move in a positive direction to ... look for a sensible solution that preserves the iconic sense of identity that the grove of monkeypod trees has created for the marketplace for so many decades."

Question: TOC's work has spanned 106 years now. What do you see as its top accomplishments?

Answer: The Outdoor Circle has played a significant role in not only creating the foundation for the landscape setting for our island community, we have also become the stewards of that legacy by continuing to be the advocates for the preservation of the bills and laws that were passed to protect those treasured assets.

Among those were the sign and advertising laws, recycling rules, street tree planting requirements, banning of billboards, undergrounding of power lines, and the establishment of the Environmental Court in Hawaii, just to name a few.

Q: Last year, TOC opposed the City Council's passage of Bill 78, which allows for ads on almost any city property or asset. How does it collide with the state's outdoor advertising law?

A: The Outdoor Circle has always felt that Bill 78 in its current form goes too far in the open-end clause that states that advertisements can be placed on any city asset or property. This is in direct violation of the spirit of the sign law that TOC fought for so many years to get passed — one that we are constantly fighting to uphold.

Whether it was ridding the Territory of Hawaii of billboards in 1927 or establishing the sign ordinance for the City and County in 1957 or fighting vehicular or aerial advertising in 2006, the assault against Hawaii's outdoor advertising law is an ongoing battle that, unfortunately, is never over.

Q: Is TOC now weighing in on other issues?

A: We're constantly vigilant in monitoring of legislative and Council resolutions and bills in efforts to keep Hawaii "Clean, Green and Beautiful." We have many committees ... that review and dissect each of the items that come up for review. It is amazing how quickly and unknowingly an item can sneak into a bill or resolution if you don't have multiple eyes or ears watching out for the public's best interest. ... We rely on our volunteers to be those eyes and ears.

Because The Outdoor Circle is a volunteer organization, each branch operates independently, having its own board of directors, bank account, member base, and donors' pool as well as, most importantly, its own agenda for projects. The main office is the administrative "trunk" of the "tree." However, the 10 branches are the grassroots volunteers that are the true face of the organization. They represent the individual character of the communities in which they are located.

Q: You have said members help push back on moves to overly "urbanize" the islands and work to prevent "proliferation of signage that would mar our scenic vistas, urban business districts and neighborhoods." What's a current focus?

A: The ongoing pressure to push the envelope of development into both our former agricultural lands and re-zoned conservation lands is unrelenting. This pressure, coupled with the declining urban canopy tree cover, is a serious threat to the existing and future standard of living facing Hawaii's residents.

The Outdoor Circle is among the founding members of a coalition called Trees for Honolulu's Future, which has a goal of increasing the urban canopy coverage to 35 percent by 2035.

Also, we're active in working with the city in salvaging and replanting many of the trees being removed from the route of the HART (Honolulu Authority for Rapid Transportation) right of way. We would like to see some of these trees moved to communities not in the path of the rail corridor. If they can't benefit from mass transit service, then maybe they can at least benefit from the canopy trees that have to be removed by planting them in parks in their communities.

Q: What's the status of Hawaii's Exceptional Tree program? Does it need tweaking?

A: Through our tree mapping program, our program director, Myles Ritchie, has spearheaded a survey and plotting of specimen trees statewide — clearly locating and documenting size, species condition and detailing environmental information for general public use.

... As for modifying the program, I think that it can always be improved, specifically with a large push to add new trees and with creation of an educational campaign to gain public support ... and, in turn, funding for the program.

Q: How many "exceptional trees" do we have?

A: There are over 1,000 statewide (including groves of exceptional trees). If a tree is designated as exceptional, then it is protected by state law and cannot be removed unless it is either a safety risk or, in rare cases, if it is delisted from the registry for a variety of reasons.

Q: What else is in the works for community improvement?

A: Among several projects: the Citizen Forester Program to map the urban canopy trees throughout the public corridor in the City and County of Honolulu, utilizing teams of volunteers to document species and coverage of our individual communities; and expanding a program involved in planting a native forest at Palehua Ridge on Oahu's North Shore.

Q:What do you find most challenging in your TOC work? Most satisfying?

A: As an organization with a very small paid administrative staff, we rely on our volunteer members and community support to carry out the legacy of our founders. Though the issues have changed over time, we meet each new challenge with optimism and a willingness to do what is best for our community while staying true to our mission.

We are constantly in need of funding to assist us in continuing our role as advocates. Any donation, large or small, is welcome to help us in the ongoing efforts of our mission statement. We also encourage the next generation to become involved by joining the branch in their community, so that our efforts are guaranteed down the line by future generations.

As with all challenges, the key to a successful outcome is to be a good listener and creatively offer realistic options for consideration. Many times it's the delivery of the message you're trying to convey that is more important than the idea itself.

Every person who lives in Hawaii has directly benefited from the work of The Outdoor Circle. We hope to continue to touch lives through our work for many years to come.

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