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TGI #21: Old Koloa Town Monkeypods

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by Juan Wilson on 13 January 2007 Revision 3.1 080111

They Paved Paradise

In a matter of days it is possible that what has become the soul of Koloa Town here on Kauai, will be desecrated. A grove of stately Monkeypod trees, a century old, will be removed to make way for the convenience of a parking lot. As Joni Mitchell once put it:

They paved paradise and put up a parking lot, with a pink hotel, a boutique, and a swinging hot spot. Doesn't it always seem to go that you don't know what you've got till it's gone? They paved paradise and put up a parking lot.

They took all the trees and put them in a tree museum. And they charged all the people A dollar and a half just to see 'em. Don't it always seem to go That you don't know what you've got till it's gone? They paved paradise and put up a parking lot.

In order to build a shopping plaza in Old Koloa Town, three men, David Nelson (of Nelson Companies Inc, Bloomfield Michigan) and property owner Eric Knudsen (of E. A. Knudsen Trust), and trust representative Stacey Wong, plan to dispose of the majority of trees on the eight acre site at the intersection of Koloa Road and Maluhia Road (also known as the Tree Tunnel Road). This in order to build a suburban shopping plaza and parking lot.

This development team provided a tree survey map (dated 12/28/07), that identifies about thirty-eight large specimen Monkeypods. Many of these trees have circumferences of over ten feet. Over two-dozen (two thirds of the trees) are scheduled for removal. When comparing this tree survey with aerial photography it becomes clear that this tree count, and tree canopy it represents, fall short of the reality on the ground. In other words, the survey undercounts the existing trees. Consequently, there will be more destruction than the developers admit to. Why? Because of the almighty dollar.

If you visit David Nelson's website (www.nelsoncos.com) you can find the company's real estate development credo. Buried in this credo are some code words for those looking below its surface. Planners and real estate speculators know the language. The credo is epitomized by the words "highest and best use". This translates as "densest and most lucrative use". Nelson says of his work: "The Nelson Companies has acquired the skills to locate the right real estate development opportunity, and once found, know how to achieve its highest and best use. The company never has a preconceived notion of what is the best way to achieve a real estate development's highest and best use; they have a willingness to explore all the possibilities. And by working with the best architects, engineers and other professionals, The Nelson Companies has been able to create real estate investments of extraordinary value."

Similarly, the use of the term "investment of extraordinary value" translates to "we get it done on the cheap". To me the message on the Nelson website is clear. Nelson will squeeze every penny out of the Koloa property for maximum revenues. There is no mention by Nelson of what is best for the community,

what amenities might be provided or what improvements or even mitigation efforts might be made in the process of developing the land.

Plazas from Hell It is instructive to see what Nelson is proud to display as shopping plazas it has created. Most, like Northfield Commons and Coventry Commons, on the mainland, consist of treeless parking lots fronting plazas of tacky-tacky boxes. Some, like Northfield Common, are not much more than vinyl paint and fiberglass cloth over packing foam. It's all designed to last only a decade after "maximizing" the return on investment.

The promotional graphic for the Shops at Koloa Town uses what can only be taken as a perverse visual joke. The project logo is a magenta rectangle overlaid with the white profile of a mature Monkeypod tree. In so doing, the enticement to customers honors what the Nelson company plans to destroy. A friend, Jonathan Jay, pointed out this logo looks not so much an effort to honor the Monkeypod, but to highlight the tree's white absence against a bizarrely lit sky. How tempting.

The Nelson Companies offers a "Koloa Brochure" that is available to prospective clients. It includes a rental space diagram and a list of anchor tenants already committed (like American Savings Bank and ABC Stores). This plan is probably the most detailed and accurate provided to the public, and shows only a handful of "saved" Monkeypod trees in the vast parking lot. Quite different from the eye-candy renderings previously available to the community. image above:Developer's rental brochure site plan of The Shops at Koloa.

David Nelson has refused to consult with the community on the issue of planning around these revered trees. Nelson claims that trees that are removed will be relocated, and some new trees will be planted to replace them. This seems a farfetched and costly effort when planning around the existing trees is possible and practical.

It is clear that even tourists visiting Koloa are upset by the idea of its Monkeypod trees being threatened. Some have even joined the local protesters holding signs in front of the site. Damaging tourism in Koloa is not in the town's, or developer's, best interest. Tourists are the specific target of the shops planning to rent in this plaza.

A Brief History of Weaseling A group called the Koloa Community Association (KCA) has been working for years to save these trees. Their patient effort has been fruitless. They have documented that the Knudsen Trust has known since September 1987; that it was the intent of the county to allow development on this site only on condition that the mature trees on the property be retained.

In June of 2006, the Knudsen Trust, through its architect, Steve Au, informed the KCA that ten of the site Monkeypod trees needed to be relocated, and none of them was among the largest on the site. There was no talk of any trees being diseased or unhealthy.

In August of 2006 the County Planning Director, Ian Costa, and his Planner, Barbara Pendragon reiterated their finding that the Applicant's plan for the Koloa site was not in accord with the Kauai General Plan. Specifically, the developer needed to retain the monkeypod trees.

As late as December of 2007, Stacey Wong, representing the Trust, assured the KCA that it did not know which or how many trees would be removed, still claiming that they intended to minimize that number. But during that same period the Trust began saying that several of the site trees were diseased and would have to be dealt with.

Now, in January of 2008, we face the likelihood that the chainsaws will be fired up and this ancient and beautiful grove of trees will be removed for the sake of the "highest and best use" of the land. more parking!

Businessmen in Old Koloa Town The Past: In 1847 Peter Brinsmade was a businessman and the Consul from the Kingdom of Hawaii to Mexico. That year he visited Europe and planned to return to Hawaii via Panama. On his passage from Panama he carried with him two Monkeypod seeds. On arriving on Oahu he found the seeds appeared viable.

He planted one in Honolulu and later, when he arrived on Kauai, planted the other in Koloa Town near the Waikomo stream. That monkeypod tree flourished and is thought to be the progenitor of all the trees in the town, and on the island.

This history is commonly referred to but may be a somewhat romanticized version of reality. It just as possible that several other intended or accidental importations of Monkeypods occurred over the years.

The Present: In any case, the Monkeypod tree has become a symbol of charming Old Koloa Town. At night, lit with strings of white lights, the old trees are a significant part of Koloa's charming ambience and a draw for tourists. It has been pointed out that Koloa is about the only town on Kauai with as heavy a concentration of large trees along its streets.

The Future: Eric Knudsen, Stacey Wong and David Nelson are businessmen today in Koloa. They too have an interest in Monkeypod trees. Not planting them but cutting them down for profit. A century and a half from now they may be as legendary as Peter Brinsmade. Legendary in the sense of "infamous" not "famous". These men will be remembered as the businessmen who came to Koloa to cut down its trees and tear out its soul.

A Last Chance for the Trees?

The developers of The Shops at Koloa Town cannot be embarrassed or shamed into doing the right thing. All that will appeal to them is pressure on the almighty dollar. If tenants indicate a desire to save the trees, that might have an influence. Interested parties could contact tenants that have already signed up and let them know how they feel about the trees.

- . Malama Market
- . American Savings Bank
- . Surf City
- . Oasis Lifestyle
- . Starwood
- . Coffee Bean
- . Tea Leaf
- . Beard Papa
- . Da Big Kahuna Burger
- . ABC Store
- . Shave Ice Paradise
- . Jim Saylor Jewelers
- . United State Postal Service

Incidentally, KCA learned on Friday that the developer has paid for his grubbing and grading permit and they can pick it up on Monday, January 14th. That's when the cutting may begin. We know that there are some on the Kauai ready to be in the trees before then.

I think the solution to this dilemma is for Nelson to go back to the drawing board. I suggest that Kauai County offer the developer a zoning variance on parking requirements that would offer more flexibility to the design consultants in laying out a new plan. This can be justified by the intended implementation of the recently completed traffic plan which promises multi-modal and mass transportation improvements that should allow for a reduction in parking requirements.

Moreover, I recommend the developer actively work with the Koloa Community Association and instruct their consultants to rearrange the project with the priority of saving every major tree on the site. It will benefit the project, the town and those who visit Koloa in the future.

Just imagine those trees lit up at night, arching over a landscaped pedestrian courtyard with paving stones, benches and kiosks - instead glistening automobile hoods over oil soaked blacktop.