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## Kiersten Faulkner

The executive director of Historic Hawai'i Foundation is eager to protect and celebrate Hawaii's historic places

By [Mark Coleman](#)

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Kiersten Faulkner has been a force in historic preservation efforts in Hawaii since January 2006, after she moved here from Denver to become the executive director of Historic Hawai'i Foundation, a nonprofit organization dedicated to saving Hawaii's historic places.

Based in the Dole Cannery building in Iwilei with a staff of four full-time and three part-time employees, the group has an annual budget of about \$500,000 that is derived wholly from private grants and donations, not counting a couple of contracts it has with the state to work on preservation planning and training.

Originally from Colorado, Faulkner became interested in historic preservation partly because of her interest in water issues; while at Tufts University in Boston, she earned a master's degree in urban and environmental policy and wrote a thesis called "Balancing Act: Resolving Water Demands in the Upper Colorado River Basin."

"I started out with this interest in how to recognize and preserve wild areas, natural areas," said Faulkner, 43, "and related to that, of course, is where do people live, and what is the experience of cities and towns and human places, because those two pieces of the world are so amazingly tied. And, really, to get liveable cities with a high quality of life, the best ones have a tie to their history."

Before attending Tufts, Faulkner served 212 years in the Peace Corps in Thailand, where she taught English as a second language and worked on environmental, economic and health issues as well. Her interest in other cultures was fueled by her time at Brigham Young University-Hawaii, where she earned a bachelor's in English, in 1991.

"It has about 2,500 students and, at least when I was there, about 150 different countries and over 200 languages were represented. So it was this amazing melting pot."

Faulkner was lured to Hawaii back then by a

Colorado friend who had visited and told her "this was the most wonderful place on Earth and you should come here."

“So I did,” she said.

After Tufts, Faulkner returned to Colorado and worked in the City and County of Denver’s planning department, for almost seven years. Then she heard about the opening at the Historic Hawai’i Foundation.

“I still had some ties here, and some family members had moved here as well,” she said.

So she applied for the job, but it took awhile for her to be accepted because she was from the mainland and foundation officials wanted to make sure they were making a good investment by hiring her.

“We were both very cautious,” she said, “but it worked out very well.”

**QUESTION:** What’s so good about historic preservation anyway? Why should a community care about it?

**ANSWER:** The history of a community contributes to its personality. Preserving the history of a place through its significant historic resources gives a community its unique character. ... Overall, historic preservation adds to the quality of life, making for a more livable community. And it involves much more than simply saving and restoring old buildings and sites of historic importance. There are economic, cultural, environmental, and educational benefits of historic preservation, all of which are inextricably connected to one another and to the living memory of involved communities.

**Q:** What about Honolulu’s historic homes tax exemption, which was criticized recently for lax enforcement? What role did your group play in adding “clarity, standardization and enforceable conditions,” as you put it in a letter to the editor, to that program?

**A:** When the original program was adopted (in the early 1980s), Historic Hawai’i Foundation had been very active in helping to promote it, so our involvement more recently was sort of a continuation of that engagement. We participated in all of the public hearings.

**Q:** What makes a home historic?

**A:** There’s basically three tests. The first is age; the rule of thumb is 50 years or older, but not everything that is 50 years or older is historic. The second is whether or not it has historic significance. That’s looking at its association with historic events, or people, or if it’s associated with a certain design approach, or work by a master, or has environmental significance.

Then the third test is what they call historic integrity: Does it still retain the characteristics that made it historic in the first place? Something could be historically significant but it’s been so substantially altered that it now longer has integrity, and it’s no longer eligible.

**Q:** What was your reaction to mayoral candidate Kirk Caldwell giving up his historic home exemption, because he thought it was hurting him politically?

**A:** Well, we don’t get involved in campaign issues. I can say generally whether or not a historic property owner opts to accept the tax exemption, the home itself is still recognized as being historically significant, and is listed on the state Register of Historic Places, so they still have all the obligations that go along with that.

**Q:** What are those obligations?

**A:** Any property over 50 years or older, whether or not it's designated as historic, has to be reviewed by the State Historic Preservation Division. ... So by taking on that responsibility of taking care of an historic property, property owners are committing to keep the characteristics submitted as historic in the first place.

**Q:** So if a guy wants to put in a kitchen or something but his home is over 50 years old, then it has to be passed on and it could be denied?

**A:** It can't be denied but it has to be given the opportunity for review. And that's one of the areas that we'd like to see some improvements, actually, with the city's program. Right now the city's one and only historic properties program is this historic homes property tax exemption program. They do not have a local preservation commission, they do not have preservation architects or archaeologists on staff. They don't have preservation planners. They don't have a preservation plan for the city. They have not either taken the initiative or integrated a reactive way to look at impacts to historic properties in any kind of comprehensive way. Instead they rely on this one incentive program and the state's Historic Preservation Division. So clearly there are problems with that approach. It means that some historic properties that are truly significant or important may be lost or destroyed because no one is looking for them. It also means that some properties that are not historically significant may be caught up in a bureaucratic back and forth because they're aren't clear standards for what to do with them.

So what we'd like to see is a better way to do that triage, to separate out the ones that truly need to be preserved and retained and celebrated from those that are really not that significant and don't need that same level of attention. Without that kind of comprehensive approach and follow through with regulations and incentives, we're making it hard to do the right thing, and that's not in anyone's best interest.

**Q:** Are you proposing a new government division?

**A:** Right now the counties of Maui and Kauai have local preservation commissions, and they have integrated preservation planning into their regular planning and permitting. So by integrating preservation into other kinds of land-use reviews, it's not an additional layer, it's just an additional awareness of something things you're reviewing anyway. '

**Q:** How much do you think this historic homes exemption program is costing the city in lost property taxes each year?

**A:** If you look at the number of properties enrolled in the program, they're assessed value, and assuming what they would have paid per assessed value, it's less than a million dollars a year — about \$900,000. So if you look at how this exemption stacks up against the 50-something other property tax exemptions, it's actually relatively small.

**Q:** What was your position about the Natatorium when you served on the Mayor Hannemann's task force on the Waikiki War Memorial Natatorium?

**A:** The majority voted for demolishing the Natatorium and building a beach. I actually voted with the minority to have full preservation and rehabilitation of the Natatorium ...

**Q:** Really? The pool and everything?

**A:** The pool and everything, but in a phased way. So first there would be stabilization and preservation, and then a reengineering and a rebuild of the active portion, which is the pool. The veterans groups also supported that, and the Friends of Natatorium supported that. They, the Friends stepped up to say that they would like to take a leadership role in finding some financing and operational approaches that could help make that financially viable.

**Q:** Do you think that's going to happen?

**A:** With the change in administration, both at the city and the state level, I think that there are more opportunities to find a public-private partnership. At the time it was not really being pursued.

**Q:** Are you still standing by the recommendation you favored at the time?

**A:** Our preferred alternative is first to preserve what's there. Partly that means stabilizing the frame and the structure, because it really is in desperate condition. It's unsafe, and it needs to be stabilized in a way that limits the impact to health and safety. That would buy time, then, to look at what are the different alternatives that could perhaps adaptively use that pool.

**Q:** What about the historic argument that once upon a time the Natatorium wasn't there and it would be nice to have the beach back?

**A:** You know, if you look at aerial photographs from the 1920s before it was built, there was no beach. I mean, if you want to restore the historic shoreline, you would lose Kaimana Beach, you would lose the volleyball court, you would lose the arbor, you would lose the parking. It would really be, I think, about 40 to 60 feet mauka of where it is now. The beach is a constructed feature.

**Q:** What about that proposal to put solar panels on the old runway at Ford Island, which some people oppose?

**A:** We are participating in the consultation with the Navy on that project. Right now the runway is being preserved. It's open space. There's no buildings on it. They mow the grass, but it's not being used. So the discussion has been: Should it be restored as it was in 1941 or should it be rehabilitated for a contemporary use such as for a solar array? The discussions have been whether or not that contemporary use of alternative energy can be designed in a way that respects the history and reflects the character of historic Ford Island.

**Q:** What about rail? Is your group concerned about disturbing the iwi (buried ancestral bones), or affecting any historic homes or buildings along the route, or any issues such as that?

**A:** Yes (Laughter). The rail project is being partially federally funded, and also is partially located on federal property as well, and as a federal action, it is required to go through an historic review process and compliance. So through that process of environmental review and historic preservation review, the federal agency consults with organizations and individuals who have an interest in historic preservation. So Historic Hawai'i Foundation was part of that consultation process, and we engaged with the Federal Transit Administration and the city throughout.

It started with identifying what are the historic properties along this route, what would the impact be on them, what are ways to avoid that impact, and in the cases where it can't be avoided, how can it be mitigated.

So all of that resulted in a programmatic agreement that sets out all those issues. Now that the programmatic agreement has been executed and the project is moving, we're involved in ensuring that the FTA and the city are complying with that.

**Q:** What are some of the major public policy accomplishments of the foundation since it was founded in 1974?

**A:** Well, we were very involved with, of course, setting up these tax exemptions for historic preservation.

Currently, Historic Hawai'i Foundation is working with the State Historic Preservation Division to update the statewide preservation plan. That is a statewide effort to lay out the vision of what historic preservation can and should mean for the state, and not only for the state government but also the counties, and also industry groups and private property owners, Native Hawaiian organizations and the visitor industry. It's a way to pull together different perspectives on economic development and land use and cultural preservation and educational activities. It's really a wonderful opportunity for people to talk about what matters to them, and how they can engage in ways to identify and preserve those places.

**Q:** How long is that going to take?

**A:** The planning process will continue through summer and a draft plan is scheduled to be released in August.

**Q:** Each year the Historic Hawai'i Foundation calls for nominations of endangered historic places throughout Hawaii, with the latest deadline to submit nominations being July 25. How many such nominations do you typically receive each year?

**A:** We've been doing the endangered historic place list since 2005, and each year we receive between 15 and 20 nominations. Then our selection panel reviews those and usually brings it down to a final list of between six and probably 10. The intent is to draw attention not only to historic sites that are endangered but to activities that can be taken save them.

**Q:** Is there a list somewhere of all the historic sites in Hawaii?

**A:** Yes, on our website we have a section of Hawaii's most endangered properties (at [www.historichawaii.org](http://www.historichawaii.org)).