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NATATORIUM'S FATE

Natatorium pool may go

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City officials are looking to bring closure to years of debate over what to do with the crumbling Waikiki War Memorial Natatorium. They say they are "seriously considering" demolishing the legendary saltwater pool at the site and will hold discussions with residents as early as this month to discuss the option — along with other possibilities.

Officials stressed that no decision on what to do with the natatorium has been made.

But they said they are eager to bring the facility out of its current state of limbo — deteriorating rapidly, and with the swimming pool closed. Collins Lam, deputy director of the city Department of Design and Construction, said officials will start making presentation on possible options for the natatorium and their costs this month or next.

The possibility of a decision sometime soon on the natatorium's fate — 30 years after the pool was closed to swimmers because of safety concerns — worries those who want the pool saved. They say it appears officials already have made up their minds to tear down the pool and are concerned a demolition would have more support in these tough fiscal times.

Friends of the Natatorium President Linuce Pang said instead of spending money to demolish the pool, the city should spend money to restore it. "The city is saying that they're short of money. But if you destroy something, you still have to have money," he said, adding that the facade of the natatorium shouldn't be considered a higher priority than the saltwater swimming pool it fronts.

"The pool is the memorial," he said.

Others say demolishing the pool and keeping its pink facade, with its grand arch, would open up precious beach space and benefit more park users and beach goers. "That pool was not designed to last a long time. It's a health and safety hazard," said Jim Bickerton, attorney and member of the Kaimana Beach Coalition, which has opposed efforts to rehabilitate the pool.

He said his group would like to see the facade saved and a beach formed where the pool sits. "We think that makes a lot of sense," Bickerton said.

Lam, with the city, declined to give details on the information to be included in community presentations on the Waikiki facility. But he said residents will be given an idea of how much each option would cost, and the pros and cons of each alternative. He added that demolishing the pool would cost "significantly" less than renovating it, but he wasn't ruling any

options out.

City officials said they are studying a variety of scenarios for the natatorium, including demolishing the pool and setting the facade farther away from the ocean, dismantling the entire memorial or renovating the entire site.

Officials have not said when a final decision on the natatorium will be made, but observers predict one could come as early as this fall. In addition to seeking public comment through meetings, officials have said they want to convene a working group of interested parties to make a recommendation of its own to the mayor — a process that conceivably could take months.

The mayor said in his State of the City address last month that the "fate of the Waikiki natatorium has dogged the city for decades" and that the back-and-forth between those who want the pool preserved and those who want the beach restored "has led to a standoff."

He added, "One of the recommendations we're seriously considering is the demolition of the pool to open up more beach space, and the reconstruction of the facade further inland or at another appropriate location." But though officials are leaning toward demolition of the Olympic-size pool, city spokesman Bill Brennan said last week that "there's nothing (that has) been finalized about it yet."



Mayor says he is "seriously considering" tearing down the pool, retaining the facade, and pledges to form a committee of community members to discuss its future.

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Duke Kahanamoku takes inaugural swim in 1927.

HISTORY OF MEMORIAL

1927: Built to honor 101 Hawai'i World War I veterans. Also this year, the site hosts a national outdoor swimming championship event and becomes a popular recreational spot.

1940s: Army uses pool to train for World War II.

1950s and '60s: O'ahu fifth-grade public school students participate in swimming program at salt-water pool.

OPINIONS VARY

In Waikiki last week, passers-by offered mixed opinions on what should happen to the memorial.

Some said they didn't think the pool could — or should — be saved, given the dwindling municipal treasury. "They don't have the money. Otherwise I'd say rebuild it," said one man, sitting under a trellis outside the natatorium.

But others said the big pricetag should be put in perspective.

Though it's unclear just how much it would take to renovate the memorial today, a project kicked off in 2000 aimed at reopening the pool estimated \$11.5 million would do it. That project was never finished because officials ran into legal problems over the work.

Lapaka Brandon, 63, of Makaha, said he realizes a renovation of the pool would cost tens of millions of dollars. But, he said, it would be well worth it. "My father used to take us there when we were kids," he said. "I think we spend a lot of money on a lot of frivolous things anyway. It depends on your priorities."

Robert and Caroline Hovey, frequent visitors to the Islands from Washington state, also supported saving the natatorium pool — despite the high cost. "They should be preserving as much of the past as they possibly can," said Robert Hovey, who added that the natatorium is something of a draw for tourists. The spot is mentioned in a host of O'ahu travel guides.

WORLD WAR I MEMORIAL

The pool opened in August 1927, with famed swimmer and surfer Duke Kahanamoku diving in for the first swim in front of a capacity crowd. The pool was built with territorial money to honor those who fought in World War I, and in memory of those who died.

The natatorium is on national and state registers of historic places.

The memorial started to show significant deterioration in the 1970s, and the pool deck now sports massive holes where concrete has corroded away or crumbled into the ocean. A report for the city issued in 2004 that detailed the condition of the natatorium said that the concrete deck was in imminent danger of collapse, and that the perimeter sea walls had a "potential collapse hazard."

That report also warned that the steady deterioration of the swimming pool threatens to undermine the structural stability of the bleachers at the site, the perimeter sea wall and the facade.

Over the last decade, the city has spent millions of dollars on the natatorium.

In 1999, former Mayor Jeremy Harris launched an \$11.5 million project to fully restore the landmark. The first phase, completed a year later, included fixing the arch and facade.

But the second phase of work was halted after a court ruling determined the city would have to obtain Health Department permits and adhere to stricter-than-expected standards to open the salt water pool. Then, in 2004, a collapse of part of the site's deck prompted emergency repairs. That work was never completed, though, because Mayor Mufi Hannemann shelved the \$6.1 million repair effort after taking office in January 2005. During his administration, minor repairs have been done to the facade.

Hannemann also gave the go-ahead for a consultant to study possible options for the natatorium. That study is still under way, but is to be completed soon.

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1979: Closed to the public because of deteriorating conditions.

1999: Honolulu Mayor Jeremy Harris initiates plans to restore landmark.

2001: City finishes fixing facade, bleachers and public restrooms.

2004: Part of deck collapses. City begins emergency repairs.

2005: Mayor Mufi Hannemann takes office, halts repair work. He launches engineering studies exploring alternative uses for the site.

2007: Army Corps of Engineers begins studies assessing the condition of shoreline.

2008: Wil Chee-Planning Inc. kicks off study on possible options for the natatorium.

February 2009: Mayor says he is "seriously considering" tearing down the pool, retaining the facade, and pledges to form a committee of community members to discuss its future.

March-April 2009: City plans to take possible options for natatorium to the community, in the form of public meetings.



Replacing an eagle's head on the facade in 2000.