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Kealia visitor center 'simpler project' than pond boardwalk

We've been keeping up with our schedule, says refuge manager

By CHRIS HAMILTON, Staff Writer

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KIHEI - Kealia Pond National Wildlife Refuge Manager Glynnis Nakai said, yes, she knows what people will say. She heard the snickers and jokes as soon as the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service officially announced last week its intent to build a new administrative office/visitor center for the refuge along Mokulele Highway.

However, Nakai insisted Wednesday that constructing the 7,500-square-foot, energy-efficient building, which is already planned and designed, won't be at all like the Kealia Pond boardwalk debacle. The boardwalk suffered numerous delays due to its delicate environmental setting and the changing legal landscape.

It even had to be rebuilt because of faulty materials and workmanship, but it finally opened Oct. 16 on the North Kihei Road side of the 704-acre wetlands park - 15 years after its plans were first announced.

"Certainly, this is on a totally different timeline; and it is a much simpler project," Nakai said. "Believe it or not, we've been keeping up to our schedule with this, especially since it involves recovery money (from the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act)."

Winzler & Kelly engineers and RIM Architects Inc. already completed the plans and designs for the project just inside the park entrance at Mile Marker 6 on Mokulele Highway. Construction is scheduled to begin in mid-April, with an opening date set for June 30, 2011, Nakai said.

And Fish & Wildlife Service officials are encouraging local contractors to bid on the project.

Fish & Wildlife Service spokeswoman Barbara Maxwell in Honolulu declined to say how much the project will cost, so they can attract the lowest bid possible.

However, according to the public request for proposals document, the contract is estimated to go for up to \$5 million.

The bidding process closes March 8, and a meeting for potential contractors will be held at 1:30 p.m. Feb. 22 at the current Kealia Pond National Wildlife Refuge office.

"We're hoping that it will provide a number of jobs, a lot of jobs," Nakai said. "Federal law prevents us from not opening the bidding up to everyone, but we really want to see the local contractors bid on this contract, so that the money stays on Maui or at least in Hawaii."

The new building will sit on 13 acres of "upland" away from the wetland and coastline. The location of the boardwalk and parking lot in a swampy area sandwiched between the road and the beach on the other side of the refuge was a complicating factor in construction of that project, Nakai said.

The U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service recently purchased the headquarters' land from Alexander & Baldwin Co. and it is now part of the refuge, Nakai said.

When the wetlands became the Kealia Pond National Wildlife Refuge in 1992, the park's four employees and dozens of volunteers worked out of a small office that burned down in 2006. Since then, they've been operating out of a couple trailers and a few shipping containers.

The new building will be just up the park road from the trailer and near the park entrance sign. The project is expected to create much greater interest in one of Hawaii's few wetland refuges.

Eventually, the Fish & Wildlife Service wants the visitor center to contain an exhibit room and meeting hall, Nakai said.

"We're hoping we will eventually draw at least 10,000 (visitors) a year," she said. "Right now, we're at just a small portion of that."

But the North Kihei Road boardwalk has been very popular since it opened, with its 14-stall parking lot at near capacity almost all day every day. Maxwell and Nakai said there was no space to put the new visitor center near the boardwalk.

Nakai said that the Mokulele Highway visitor center project will also incorporate photovoltaic panels to heat water and supply electricity. The design also calls for using reflective paint on the roof and 30-space parking lot in order to seek LEED green certification. LEED stands for Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design and is considered the "gold standard" in environmentally friendly construction.

Article Photos



U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service image

The Kealia Pond National Wildlife Refuge in Kihei will get its first-ever visitor center in the next year or so, paid for with up to \$5 million in federal stimulus funding. The project off Mokulele Highway will create a 7,500-square-foot green building that also will hold refuge offices.

"We're really excited," Nakai said. "We will finally have a comfortable place to work and for our volunteers to kick back after a long day and put their feet up."

Dedicated Kealia refuge volunteers help with everything from removing invasive plants and animals to minor maintenance.

The new building, unlike the ones now, will be showcased from Mokulele Highway. Right now, the refuge has no visitor center at all.

Because of its tricky wetland location, which is prone to flooding in mere minutes during the winter rains, the new building will not be located next to the existing parking lot at the pond viewing spot down the park road from the current offices, Nakai said.

Future plans, which have no money and are really more like ideas now, call for a boardwalk, Nakai said. It would run from the new building a few blocks down to the old Kanuimanu aquaculture ponds and levees, where commercial catfish were raised until 1995, she said.

Really, another boardwalk?

Nakai, who was a good sport through all the past jokes and criticism, apparently just couldn't help it herself. She giggled, too.

"Yes, we want to build another boardwalk," she said with a sudden serious tone. "We want the refuge to be visible and accessible."

The park road is short and narrow. The raised mesh of a boardwalk is the only way visitors and schoolchildren could safely walk year-round from the visitor center in order to view the lush marshes, exotic birds and endangered sea turtles, Nakai said.

Anyone who wants to bid on building the project is encouraged to call Nakai at 875-1582.

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