

## Improving Access to Physical Activity: Revitalizing the Old Kona Airport Walking/Jogging Path

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### Abstract

Environmental approaches to increase access to physical activity facilities are recommended for promoting physical activity. People with easy access to recreational facilities are more likely to achieve the recommended levels of physical activity, and neighborhoods that are walkable and provide access to public parks and jogging trails are associated with higher levels of activity. Friends for Fitness, a grassroots organization in West Hawai'i spearheaded a community-based planning process and intervention to revitalize the Old Kona Airport into a walking/jogging trail. Through community engagement, support from local media and businesses, and volunteers, Friends for Fitness succeeded in increasing physical activity among residents. After three years, the number of walkers utilizing the trail increased more than 20%.

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### Introduction

The benefits of physical activity for maintaining a healthy weight and preventing chronic conditions such as cardiovascular disease and diabetes are well-documented (U. S. Department of Health and Human Services [HHS], 1996). Yet, slightly over half (52.8%) of the U.S. population still do not meet the recommendation for moderate physical activity, defined as at least 30 minutes of activity on five or more days per week (Centers for Disease Control [CDC], 2003a). Additionally, almost three-quarters (73.7%) of the population do not engage in vigorous physical activity three or more days per week (CDC, 2003b). This level of physical inactivity is estimated to amount to approximately 200,000 deaths per year (HHS, 1996).

The CDC recommends using environmental approaches to increase access to physical activity facilities, thereby promoting physical activity (CDC, 2002). Studies have found that people with easy access to recreational facilities are twice as likely to achieve the recommended

levels of physical activity; conversely, people living in areas that lack public outdoor recreational facilities were more likely to be overweight (Huston, Evenson, Bors, et al., 2003; Catlin, Simoes, Brownson, 2003). Characteristics of the physical environment can also encourage physical activity. For example, people are more likely to walk in areas where the scenery is attractive and they feel friendly towards their neighbors (Ball, Bauman, Leslie, et al, 2001). Some evidence suggests weather and safety concerns may be relevant as well (Humpel, Owen, & Leslie, 2002).

Walking is one of the most popular forms physical activities (HHS, 1996). Because it is easy, requires no equipment, and appeals to most populations, walking has been the focus of many interventions to promote physical activity (Siegel, Brackbill, & Heath, 1995). Access to public parks, walking/ jogging trails, and "walkable" neighborhoods that enable residents to walk to common destinations, are associated with higher levels of physical activity (Saelens, Salls, Black, et al., 2003). In a rural Missouri

study, after a new walking trail was introduced, 55% of residents reported that they increased their walking (Brownson, Housemann, Brown, et al., 2000).

### **Program Background**

More than half (56.6%) the residents of the western side of the island of Hawai'i are at risk for overweight or obesity (Hawai'i Department of Health [DOH], 2004a). Forty-two percent of the community fails to obtain enough moderate physical activity, and 61% does not meet the recommendation for vigorous physical activity (DOH, 2004b; DOH, 2004c). Despite a pleasant year-round climate, West Hawai'i lacks places to be physically active. There are few parks and virtually no sidewalks. Residential areas are strewn with steep narrow roads connected by a highway unfriendly to pedestrians.

For more than thirty years, the multi-ethnic community of West Hawai'i looked to alleviate this problem. When the Old Kona Airport closed in July 1970, the state and county intended to convert the space into a multi-use recreational area. Since the closing, there were at least three major attempts to plan the development of this 100-acre property. However, plans for actual improvements were slow to develop, and limited state funding made conversion to a park and proper maintenance difficult. Over time, the walking path became overgrown with tall fountain grass and thorny kiawe trees – a constant reminder of the unfulfilled potential of this “park” along West Hawai'i's shoreline.

Formed in 1992, Friends for Fitness' mission is to create and promote a healthy, livable, and physically active West Hawai'i. To that end, the grassroots organization formed the West Hawai'i Community Coalition and conducted a community-wide survey to examine the barriers and facilitators to increasing physical activity among local residents. In their June 2000 survey, they found walking was the most common physical activity in West Hawai'i. They also found that the lack of time and safe places to walk were major barriers to increasing physical activity. Residents were additionally asked if the Old Kona Airport State Park should be “reclaimed” and improved to provide more

opportunities for physical activity. Eighty percent (80%) of the respondents were in favor of improving the park and suggested improvements such as adding beautification (including trees); creating multi-use trails, a children's play area, and picnic areas; and increasing pedestrian safety.

Based on the findings of the survey and a high level of interest from residents, Friends for Fitness initiated a community-wide participatory planning effort to revitalize the park. The process began with a series of facilitated community meetings where government officials and residents envisioned what the park could be like. Despite state and county officials informing the group that government funding would not be available for improvements, as well as criticism from some residents that the planning effort was “reinventing the wheel,” Friends for Fitness was determined to succeed. The planning process yielded a range of ideas, with input from residents of all ages, including high school students with hopes of transforming the weathered asphalt runway into a drag strip. The group prioritized issues to be addressed in the development park's design. A professional planner also drafted a series of conceptual designs for improvements that could be phased in section by section.

With the completed conceptual designs, Friends for Fitness sought and received funding from the Healthy Hawai'i Initiative, Hawai'i State Department of Health to revitalize the walking/jogging path section of the park and to conduct community-wide informational campaigns to promote the path and physical activity in West Hawai'i. Community organizations and private businesses offered financial support and other resources to revitalize the park and preserve its cultural and historical significance. By the summer of 2002, Friends for Fitness and its partners began revitalizing and enhancing the walking/jogging path.

### **Methods**

#### **Sustainable Partnerships**

Friends for Fitness formed a Steering Committee to guide the overall strategy of the project and assure that the project's direction remained

consistent with the wishes of the community. Understanding the area from a cultural perspective was important as they made initial plans to develop the area. The Steering Committee invited a local *kupuna* (elder) to share with the group the oral history of her ancestral land. Committed to preserving the historical significance of the area, they officially named the walking/jogging path “Maka‘eo,” which is the area’s original name.

Friends for Fitness believed efficient mobilization of resources within the community would be a critical factor for success. They partnered with community-based organizations, local businesses, and countless individuals. The Hawai‘i State Department of Land and Natural Resources provided needed support and resources. The Rotary Club of Kona supplied project leadership, financial support, and coordination of events and volunteers for this project. People’s Advocacy for Trails Hawai‘i also contributed project leadership and event coordination. Foundations, businesses, and several individuals gave additional financial support. In addition to direct financial support, the project benefited from in-kind support from individuals and organizations offering their professional services.

As progress was made, other members of the community began to contribute to the walking path. A large land developer donated trees. Local companies provided the use of excavation equipment, significantly easing the task of landscaping the area. A local rock wall contractor donated expertise and labor to build a rock wall to frame the entry way to path. A retired teacher handcrafted a sign for the path and built a community display case. In addition there were numerous individual donations of plants, landscaping supplies, and labor. Volunteers expressed their creativity by planting an edible herb garden for path users to pick. Some plants were arranged to spell “mahalo” (thank you) and “aloha,” and another volunteer installed a water feature to serve as a sprinkler and a source of enjoyment for all ([PowerPoint 1](#)).

Local media organizations (print, radio, and cable) were also key partners. For example, West Hawai‘i Today published a series of articles relating to the revitalization of the path and promoting the health benefits of walking by sharing the stories of individuals who increased their physical activity through use of the walking/jogging path (see [Appendix A](#)). “Walking a Path of Inspiration,” told the remarkable story of a 24-year-old woman who lost 150 pounds over an 18-month period by walking on the path (see [Appendix B](#)). After her first walk, she initially wanted to give up; but she was inspired by a partially paralyzed 70-year-old man she met on the path who struggled to walk even with leg braces and a walker for just one mile. His encouraging words kept her walking.

### **Community Engagement**

Community events were employed to engage public participation. In April 2003, Friends for Fitness staged Wild Walk, a large-scale community event promoting the walking/jogging path and the concept that physical activity is fun. Supported by corporate sponsorship, the event enrolled 186 residents aged 3-86 years old in a 50-mile walking challenge. The event also included activities for children and families and was the subject of a feature article about two participants who walked the path to manage their chronic conditions (see [Appendix C](#)).

In January of 2004, Friends for Fitness organized its first Corporate Fitness Challenge. The goal was to engage local businesses in supporting the path and to encourage employers to promote physical activity and better nutrition at the worksite. In addition to presentations at worksites, the Corporate Fitness Challenge was promoted through radio, newspaper, and on the local cable show *Living in Paradise* ([Video Clip 1](#) and [Video Clip 2](#)). Eleven teams of six participants represented a diverse group of local businesses. Each team received motivational support and encouragement to eat healthy from a designated volunteer team captain from Friends for Fitness. To keep the challenge friendly, prizes were also given for the ugliest pair of

sneakers and best team outfits. The event raised \$4,000 towards the revitalization of the path.

In an effort to sustain the Corporate Fitness Challenge as an annual community event, Friends for Fitness convened a focus group in September 2004 to seek feedback and suggestions from participants on ways to improve the challenge. Suggestions included lengthening the challenge from four to eight weeks, simplifying the method of logging miles, recruiting business more aggressively, and considering the installation of lighting at the path to enable path users to walk in early evening hours and facilitate more time to walk during the winter months.

In January of 2005, Friends for Fitness organized the second Corporate Fitness Challenge. This challenge was six weeks long, and involved fifteen teams of six participants. This event raised \$4,800 towards the revitalization of the path.

In addition to the events, community volunteers taking responsibility for small, routine activities were essential to developing the path. Volunteers provided all the labor required to maintain the path, including watering the plants daily, clearing the fountain grass around the path, pruning trees, weeding, clearing debris, crushing lava rock, and amending the soil. One Saturday each month is designated as Cleanup Day, on which residents come together to work

on larger landscaping projects at the path. Friends for Fitness created a recognition program to publicly acknowledge individuals and businesses that support the path by publishing a picture with a brief description of the individual's contribution in the West Hawai'i Today. Hawai'i County Mayor Harry Kim also declared an annual Malama Aina (care for the land) Community Cleanup Day to acknowledge the volunteers. In addition to positive responses from the local community, Friends for Fitness also earned commendation for service from Governor Linda Lingle in November 2005 (see Appendix D).

### Results

Evaluation of the project included tracking in-kind donations and the number of community organizations and individuals participating in project. Walking counts taken at three times per day (morning, noon, and evening) on three days (two weekdays and one weekend day) were taken to estimate the number of path users. Figure 1 summarizes the walking counts from January 2003 through June 2005. The walking count data shows dramatic, but consistent drops in the number of walkers during the month of June. This contradicts national data indicating that people tend to be more active in the summer (HHS, 1996). Hotter temperatures (average high temperature of 85°F compared to 81°F in January) combined with longer days and a location in the middle of a lava field may be partly responsible for this.

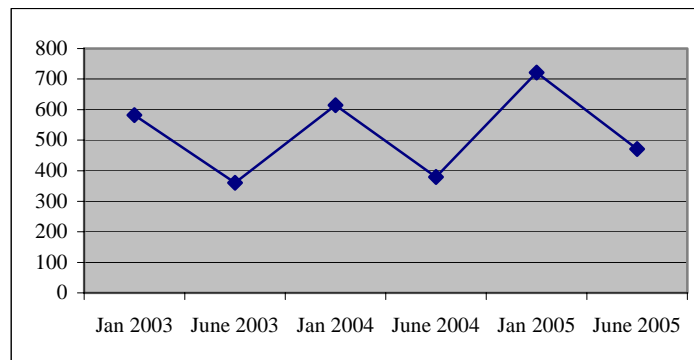


Figure 1  
Walking Counts, 2003-2005

The major outcome of the environmental change was to increase the number of path users by 20%. Figure 2 compares the January data for 2003 to 2005 and shows a 24% increase in the

number walkers from 582 in 2003 to 721 walkers in 2005. Also, in Figure 3, the 30% increase in the number of walkers from 361 in 2003 to 471 in 2005 is displayed.

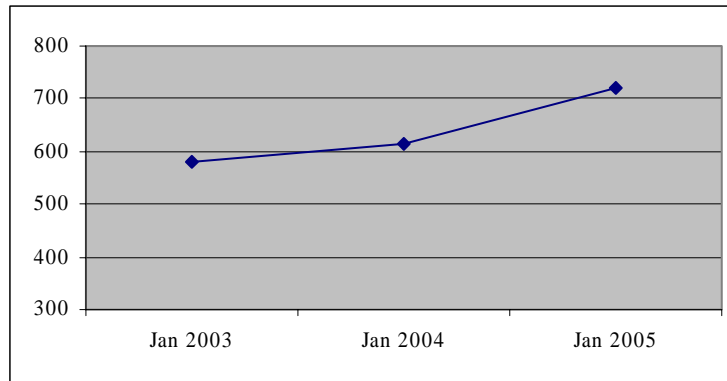


Figure 2  
Walking Counts, January Only, 2003-2005

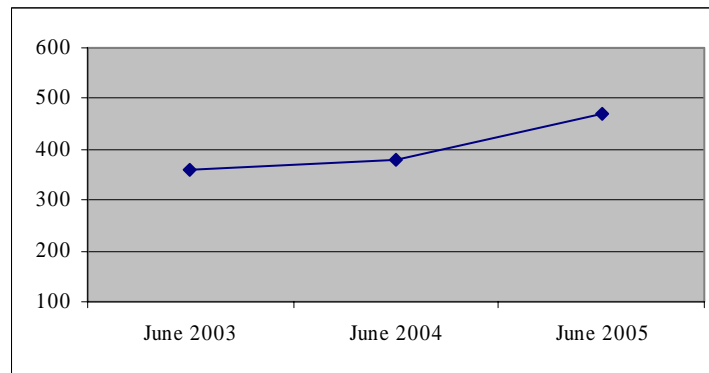


Figure 3  
Walking Counts, June Only, 2003-2005

Friends for Fitness also collected data from participants in the Corporate Fitness Challenges. Overall, the feedback was positive. Participants found the use of teams provided peer support to institute and maintain healthy changes in their workplace. They also reported that the timing the challenge with the New Year was a great idea and that media exposure was excellent. One participant shared how the challenge was his start toward being more physically active and

eating better which resulted in a significant weight loss of 60 pounds. Some participants even reported positive changes in their medical tests and screenings.

A group of school teachers from the 2005 Corporate Fitness Challenge walked a combined total of 5,182 miles and lost a total of 165 pounds. Prior to the start of the challenge, participants were surveyed about their physical

activity and eating habits. Participants exercised for at least 10 minutes on an average of three days during the previous week and the mean number of minutes exercised per day was 50 minutes. The majority of participants (66%) rated their health as “good” on a five point scale ranging from poor to excellent.

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### **Discussion**

This project is a model public-private sector partnership for creating sustainable environmental changes to increase access to safe places for physical activity. Through the leadership of a grassroots community coalition,

the community took responsibility for revitalizing a neglected walking/jogging path while promoting the health benefits of physical activity. Friends for Fitness created and published a walking map and a Fun Fitness Resource Guide for the West Hawai'i community; created a [website](#); and mobilized the community to revitalize the Maka'e'o walking/jogging path at the Old Kona Airport State Park. A few years ago, Maka'e'o was overgrown and unused. Today, it is a beautifully landscaped trail, where walkers rest on benches, stretch on stretching posts, do sit ups on a sit up bench, drink fresh water at a drinking fountain, and read about upcoming physical activity events and nutrition tips at the display case.

Friends for Fitness harnessed the power of a network. Partnerships with local businesses, community events, and a well-developed volunteer program proved to be successful strategies for creating a symbiotic relationship between the path and the community. In an 18-month period (January 2003 to June 2004), they raised \$43,000 through in-kind donations (public relations, marketing, media, irrigation and landscaping supplies and services, prizes and incentives, trees and plants) and other grants. Local businesses and Solid Rock Ministries, a youth group, agreed to continue contributing time and resources towards this effort. Maka'e'o also benefited from non-local sponsors. In March 2005, Washington Mutual Bank brought 170 employees to a retreat in West Hawai'i. They worked with the community volunteers to clean and refurbish the area, contributing time, equipment, and a cash donation of \$3,000.

The major difficulty with implementing the environmental changes to the park derived from navigating through state and county agencies and regulations for approvals and permits for renovations. Friends for Fitness invested considerable time in building and nurturing relationships with the government officials and maximizing the visibility of the project. Current ownership of the park resides with the Hawai'i State Department of Land and Natural Resources, but the land is scheduled to be transferred to the Hawai'i County Department of Parks and Recreation in 2006. In the meantime,

Friends for Fitness will continue to promote walking and being healthy and improve the trail by installing solar powered lights, ADA-

compliant par course equipment, and a shade structure.

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## Appendices

- A – West Hawai'i Today article: "Volunteers spruce up Old Kona Airport walking path"
- B – West Hawai'i Today article: "Walking a path of inspiration"
- C – West Hawai'i Today article: "Like all journeys, it began with one step"
- D – Governor's Commendation

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**PRICE OF PARADISE**

**West Hawaii  
Housing  
Market**

**A three-part series**

**FOR SALE**

**State of  
the Market**

**Lack of affordable  
housing**

**First-time  
homebuying**

**Take  
another  
look!**

Last January, FFF conducted a survey to find out how many people used the path on a typical day between 7 a.m. and 9 a.m. There were over 100 people in two hours, said Bush.

"If all of those people put in just one hour of one day of every month, think of the difference and vast improvement they would make," she said.

Without volunteers, the path would not have the stretching posts, signage, balancing beams, herb garden, nursery, and drinking fountain seen today. These items are products of the work, time and money of volunteers and local donors.

Bush estimated it would cost about \$700,000 to renovate the entire path. Over \$100,000 has already been spent on the path.

Future products include a playground, a historical site display, and native plant signage.

Maka'eo is one of the names given to this area of land. It means "piercing eye." Historians believed an ancient village with fish ponds, a coconut grove, planting pits, house sites and burial grounds sat on this land. Beyond this, not much is known.

FFF is trying to gather information about the area historic background. The non-profit organization is searching for stories, artifacts and photos of the old village.

To get involved with the development of the Maka'eo path, contact FFF Heidi Stromberg at 325-7602 or [heidiho@gte.net](mailto:heidiho@gte.net).

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# Walking a path of inspiration

By COLLEEN MARSHALL  
West Hawaii Today

It isn't the plane crash that left him partially paralyzed, or discussing the painful year of hospital rehabilitation that makes Gordon Penix's eyes tear.

Hearing he has touched the lives of others brings emotion to his face, his eyes grow larger and the loquacious man quiets momentarily. Sitting in a wheelchair with crutches close by at the Makaeo Walking/Jogging Path at the Old Kona Airport State Park, Penix says it was a typical momentary encounter on the pathway that touched him the most.

"The one story that almost made me cry was when this young girl, she couldn't have been more than 24, who lived with her mom and couldn't even work because she was so heavy. I met her the first time she came out walking and talked to her. The next day she said she woke up and didn't want to

come back, but then thought, 'He's handicapped and I'm handicapped, so I'd better get walking.' She said I encouraged her to walk more and get better. She lost about 150 pounds over about a year and a half and is just as happy as can be," he says.

As early morning walkers and joggers pass Penix at the entrance to the pathway, nearly every one shouts a greeting and he responds to each by name, often following with a series of questions.

They make coming to the path

See **PUTTING:**  
Page 4A

Gordon Penix shares a laugh with Mandy Bergey at the Old Kona Airport Makaeo Walking/Jogging Path. Penix is a regular there and an inspiration to the joggers and walkers who know him.

—MICHAEL DARDEN—WHT





## Appendix B

# ...Putting 'a good face on life'

### From Page 1A

daily to exercise so easy, he says.

Stretching his left leg to show the braces lining his calves, Penix says he is what doctors call an incomplete paraplegic — paralyzed, but with partial movement in his lower body. He speaks of his ordeal as easily as he describes past fishing trips or the salmon and trout he caught during those outings.

"I don't get too upset," he says. "I don't have nightmares or anything like that."

It was nearly six years ago that Penix, then in his late 60s, boarded the plane for his latest fishing venture, a trip similar to ones he'd been on the previous four years with senior partners at the law firm where he worked. Following a last minute change in pilots, the group took off from Seattle, headed for a cabin on Vancouver Island.

"We got in trouble," he says simply. "We crashed into a glacier and I was thrown out onto the ice a good 15 to 20 feet from the plane. The engine ended up sitting in the front seat where I was — it would have crushed me. I think I lost consciousness for a while and I had badly cut my head, but the first thing I thought of was the smoking plane and that I had to get the other people out real fast."

After a failed attempt at crawling, Penix says he picked up one leg and shook it, realizing that all of the bones were broken. The process was repeated with his other leg, with the same results, but he didn't feel anything.



—MICHAEL DARDEN—WHT

Gordon Penix walks the path at Old Kona Airport.

"Then I knew it was my spinal cord," he says. "I knew right away I wasn't a quadriplegic because I could move my upper body, but everything below my waist was totally gone."

When a rescue plane finally arrived at the scene, they came without stretchers, only body bags, because they didn't believe anyone survived. Everyone did survive, but had substantial injuries, he says.

Penix spent weeks in a full body cast. It was a year of intensive rehabilitation until he was allowed to go home. Although he admits there were times immediately following the crash he wanted to die, that thought quickly was quieted.

"I am so thankful for all of the good friends who came to see me when I was in the hospital. That's when I decided I couldn't let them down. That's when I decided to

have a good face on life," Penix says.

That hasn't always been easy for the man who used to run every day with the goal of entering marathons. He first struggled to complete a half-mile walk, but has moved up to recently finishing 2.1 miles one day, a feat that took three and one-half hours.

He says discovering people see him as an inspiration, often times picking up their pace or pushing themselves to complete another lap, is encouraging and rewarding, and helps to keep him coming back.

"I walk at least a mile a day," he says. "I alternate between my walker and crutches, but I don't get tired. I always seem to have a lot of energy. I get frustrated at times, but I try to stay pretty cool. I try to live a normal life as much as I can."

*cmarshall@westhawaiiitoday.com*



# Like all journeys, it began with one step

By **KAREN IWAMOTO**  
West Hawaii Today

Rosemary Ekert and George Tamashiro could have passed each other a dozen times without noticing.

Both walk around the jogging trail at the Old Kona Airport park complex at least twice a week; both were there walking April 5.

But the pair met officially only after learning they were the first to complete a 50-mile walk around the jogging track.

They began walking April 5 and finished April 12.

The informal competition was sponsored by the West Hawaii



**TAMASHIRO**

Friends for Fitness.

"It wasn't so much about competing and winning," said Heidi Stromberg of West Hawaii Friends for Fitness. "It was more about encouraging people to get out and be active."

Ekert, a 50-year-old X-ray technician at Kona Community Hospital, underwent open heart surgery two years ago and had stents put into her legs. Walking, she said, has helped her keep fit and active.

She also takes tai chi and swims at Kona Community



**EKERT**

when his doctor warned him he needed to exercise to keep the disease under control.

"I figured I have to do something or else end up a vegetable," he said.

Although retired, he said another of his goals is starting a new business. Sitting around the house makes him bored and restless, he said.

Ekert inspired her grandson

Aquatic Center.

Tamashiro, 67 and retired, was diagnosed with diabetes about 12 years ago. He didn't start walking regularly until a year and a half ago,

## ...Group's next event slated for fall

### From Page 1A

Tim Ekert, 10, to compete in the walk and he was the first child to finish.

She said her daughter, Tim's mother, gave her all the encouragement she needed.

"She said there's no way Mom's going to walk 50 miles," Ekert said. "After that I knew I had to finish it."

About 200 people signed up for the competition, which ended Saturday. Those who

completed 50 miles by Saturday received a T-shirt, Stromberg said.

She said West Hawaii Friends for Fitness' next event is a corporate competition tentatively scheduled for September.

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