

To: Honolulu City Council Budget Committee
The Honorable Ernest Martin, Chair

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Committee Hearing: Tuesday, April 20, 2011
9:00 a.m.
Committee Meeting Room

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APR 20 8 27 AM '11
CITY CLERK
HONOLULU, HAWAII

Subject: Support for CB3, Relating to the real property tax exemption for historic residential real property

I have owned my historic home since 1997. It will have its 100 year birthday in 2014. I purchased it to forge a new life after my wife of 25 years died of breast cancer in 1995, having lived in Kailua for over 20 of those years. My wife was from the south and lived her childhood in an old house in Mt Airy, North Carolina. We both appreciated those communities like Savannah, Georgia and Charleston, South Carolina that were known for their historic home preservation programs, which brought considerable attention from visitors and provided an economic boost to those communities. Indeed, over my life of 64 years plus, I have grown to appreciate communities around the world that maintain the character and history of their past, but have been painfully disappointed in how globalization has resulted in so many developed countries with cities looking painfully alike. It would be a shame and shortsighted if the present program of historic preservation in Hawaii was repealed and there was no longer any incentive to support the labor of love in maintaining these delicate and beautiful reminders of our past.

I never realized after my purchase how much attention I would need to give to maintaining and preserving my beautiful home. The entire exterior and interior has been repaired, restored, or replaced to preserve the structural integrity and original character of the house. Every accessible wire and pipe (all water, gas, and some drain pipes) have been replaced or repaired, but there are some that are buried too deep in the structure of the house for access and problems that remain are a constant reminder of the age of the house.

The windows are constantly a problem: the amount of time and effort spend on each window could have been used to replace them several times over. Many windows, chewed down to a hollow shell from termites required replacement. You can imagine how much money and effort it takes to copy the exact delicate detail of the original one, and install a new copy in its place. One window – the bay window, and the Chinese door took 3-6 months each to repair/restore and still pose maintenance challenges that require monitoring and periodic attention. This unfortunately is not an uncommon problem at my house; I have several windows on the queue for replication and replacement. Money is always an issue to accomplish the task.

My house is filled with surprises; some good and some not so good.

Good surprises: included the pristine condition of my ground floor – made of ½ inch ohia, after removing the old wool carpets and sanding and refinishing the surface.

Another happy surprise was the structural integrity of the walls built of solid cedar wood and standing in excellent shape uncovered after removing an assortment of deteriorating surface boarding that was added over time.

My best surprise was finding a second ceiling in my family room; the one originally visible was made of perforated canic, which unlike the condition in most of the other rooms of the house, was showing its age and was an ugly eyesore. Not sure what to do, or how to replace this, while attempting to rewire the ceiling fan (in my quest to replace all of the electric wiring), my electrician found another more beautiful wood ceiling hidden by the surface canic which revealed a detailed wooden surface with 4 crisscross planks of wood bordered by beautiful molding....wow! You can imagine how delighted I was with such a discovery. I savored every moment of the removal of the canic and the restoration of this new and beautiful ceiling showcase to my home.

Bad surprises are painful to remember and to relate. Simple ones that most of us experience have included corroded drainage pipes draining directly into the ground, a gas leak from corroded gas lines that was called to attention by the gas company when my gas usage increased 10 fold due to the leak. Yikes, my house could have exploded! But the worst surprises came from finding ground termite infestation at the base of my bay window and in my kitchen, as well as a never ending list of exterior areas affected by ground termites. In each case, replacement and repair was challenged by the overall goal to preserve the original integrity of the house which added another level of concern and soaring expense in addition to the structural considerations.

It is clear to me that my house will never cease to require constant attention and repair. The Historic Hawaii Preservation program in some form is needed to insure a historic legacy for the generations to come. Indeed, it would be easy to fabricate plastic windows to replace the old wooden ones, and seek simple solutions that would compromise the vision of the historic preservation program of Hawaii. How long it would take for someone to just tear my house down and start over would be just a matter of time.....maybe generations from now. I hope never to witness such devastation.

In conclusion, I think the issue at hand is more complicated and important than envisioned by those in support of, and those against maintaining a program of historic home preservation in Hawaii. Clearly, more oversight is necessary, but from my perspective to repeal or eliminate the present program would be a serious mistake that in the end will even be regretted by those so strongly opposed to the present provision.

