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Hawaii News

Plantation landmark to be restored

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A Star-Advertiser photo from November 1960 shows a Waipahu street scene.

While Waipahu has seen significant growth and change over the decades, one constant remains in the former plantation town: the sugar mill's 175-foot smokestack, a symbol of the once-thriving sugar cane industry.

In the 1930s the Oahu Sugar Co. mill served as the focal point of the community as the area's largest employer with 2,400 workers.

The mill shut down in 1995 — after nearly 100 years in operation — and much of it was torn down three years later.

The YMCA purchased two acres of the site in 1997 to house its Leeward branch on Mokuola Street. The next year, Oahu Sugar donated two additional acres with the condition that the nonprofit preserve the generator building, which now houses the branch's fitness center, and the smokestack.

The smokestack has deteriorated and sustained surface damage from exposure to the elements over time. It needs repairs to prevent future structural problems.

THE YMCA is undertaking a major restoration to repair the smokestack's concrete cracks, repaint it and make other improvements with the help of \$200,000 in grants-in-aid money awarded this year by the state Legislature for the restoration's first phase. The Legislature's grants-in-aid provide capital improvement project funds and operating funds to nonprofits statewide.

"When people see it (smokestack), it's a lot of good memories," said Jennifer Townsend, executive director of the 2,700-member Leeward YMCA. "Since I've been here we've had so many people that have been connected to the smokestack and the mill come through and tell us stories of when they worked here and when their forefathers worked here."

The YMCA also plans to invest \$100,000 on the first phase of the smokestack restoration project, which is expected to span about one year. Later phases will focus on smokestack maintenance, said Kerri Van Duyne, the organization's vice president of development.

Several longtime residents describe the smokestack as a community landmark that represents the town's plantation history.

Anna Kaneshiro, who has lived in Waipahu for more than 60 years, recalled when her family lived on Waipahu Street and her father and grandfather worked for the Oahu Railway and Land Co. Kaneshiro, 72, said she still remembers the scent of molasses wafting from the mill and shopping at local businesses like Arakawa's store.

"We swim in the pool a lot (at the YMCA), and we see the shadow of the smokestack," Kaneshiro said. "It's amazing we can get so close to it and touch it. It's one landmark that is recognizable."

The YMCA did some work on the smokestack between 2001 and 2002, but the current effort marks the first time since it secured government funds. Van Duyne said the first phase "is the most important piece because this is the repair work that really needs to be done."

The area near the mill is also home to other cultural and community resources, such as the Filipino Community Center, Hawaii's Plantation Village and Hans L'Orange Park, which was renamed for the longtime Waipahu plantation manager who developed athletic programs in the community.

Longtime Waipahu resident Lillian Ramirez, 82, said that seeing the smokestack brings back memories of when her father had a mechanic shop on Waipahu Street. Back then, she said, "if that (smokestack) wasn't there, I don't think you could find Waipahu at all. There's a lot of memories."

Although Ramirez has moved in and out of Waipahu over the years, she said, "We always seem to find our way back."

Democratic state Rep. Henry Aquino, a lifelong Waipahu resident who represents the district, described the smokestack as "an emblem of pride in the community" and stressed the significance of preserving a "very important piece of our history."

"When it (mill) closed it was a very difficult time. It affected the community for a good number of years," said Aquino. The smokestack, he said, serves as a "reminder of the plantation days for our community. It's a reminder moving forward not to forget our roots."