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Progress underway for new Kailua Bay regatta course

3 Kona canoe clubs lead construction effort, launch GoFundMe site

KAILUA-KONA, HAWAII ISLAND—Three Kona canoe clubs are leading the push to bring outrigger canoe racing back into Kailua Bay for 2026 and beyond. In collaboration with Hawai'i Island's Moku O Hawai'i Outrigger Canoe Racing Association, the Kailua Bay Regatta Course (KBRC) is a community-wide effort that recently kicked off a GoFundMe page to help finance the project.

"Kai 'Opua, Keauhou and Kai'Ehitu—plus the island's Moku O Hawai'i Canoe Racing Association—have been meeting for months to bring this to fruition and we all support reconstruction of the Kailua Bay Regatta Course to return canoe paddling regattas to Kona," says Bill Armer, president of Keauhou Canoe Club.

Kailua Bay regattas have been on hold for nearly three years due to functional problems with the old race course and Armer says the new course will bring thousands of participants and spectators back to Kailua Pier to revitalize the pageantry and excitement of Kona regattas.

"No other sporting event stages young and old—from age 10 to folks in their 80s—competing in the same koa canoes on the same course on the same day. "We at Keauhou Canoe Club invite and appreciate all support of this effort."

With a projected completion of March 2026, the \$85K Kailua Bay Regatta Course will be used for Moku, Big Island Interscholastic Federation (BIIF) high school and other community racing events. A March completion date would line up the course to host 2026 regattas presented by each of the three canoe clubs and BIIF Kona-side regattas for the 2026-27 season.

"Being able to race in Kona enables paddlers to compete in different conditions than Hilo," notes Mike Atwood, Kealakehe High School paddling coach. "Hilo's course is inside a breakwater and somewhat protected while the Kona course is open to ocean waves and winds."

Atwood adds the "clear waters" of Kailua Bay have been the location of BIIF regattas for two decades and Kailua Bay continues to be used by West-side schools for practice from November thru February.

The islandwide Moku o Hawai'i will own the course once it is completed. The association is home to 15 canoe clubs and the new course will have 16 lanes. Doug Bumatay, Moku president, says about 2300 paddlers signed up for the 2025 racing season and shares the number of participants have risen in the last five years.

“The Kailua race course is definitely needed, for sure—especially for the Kona paddlers and their families, emphasizes Bumatay. “It’s a big deal for the three clubs to host their regattas there; it’s their opportunity to shine.” He feels the project sets the tone for other courses that have similar challenges, such as protecting coral.

The KBRC project has involved getting permits from the Board of Land and Natural Resources and their Dept. of Boating and Outdoor Recreation (DOBOR), the Dept. of Aquatic Resources (DAR), as well as the Army Corps of Engineers in conjunction with the National Marine Fisheries Service and the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA). Project organizers believe it is the first permitted engineered and designed outrigger canoe course in the state.

Surveying and layout services were donated by Wes Thomas and Associates with field assistance from Palani Greenwell of Foresight Engineering & Design. The course’s lanes will be installed through a system of 3,000-pound concrete mooring blocks, steel sand anchor screws and one drilled pin in solid rock. The racing lanes will run in a north-south direction with canoes lining up for race starts from mauka to makai.

“All of this will be installed by Jack’s Diving Locker, who is licensed to perform this underwater work, with free mooring block delivery assistance from Isemoto Contracting to the sandy bottom waters off Kailua Pier,” details Greenwell. “West Hawaii Concrete also provided all nine concrete blocks free of charge.”

Course construction is set to start in January. To protect coral growing on the southern line of the course, the blocks will be placed in sandy areas and an underwater line will go between them, up off the bottom, and course race flags can be tied down to that line. Greenwell says the trunk line between the blocks will be in place only during racing season and removed afterward.

Pointing out the generous donation of time and materials have kept the project’s cost down, Kai ‘Opua President Kris Hazard says the \$85K price tag is worth it for Hawai‘i Island.

“The benefits of having regattas here in Kailua Village are many,” notes Hazard, who is also an active paddler. “The excitement of the colorful racing flags, the beautiful koa wood canoes, the smiles, laughter and cheering of our paddling community— they all bring us together as a vibrant, healthy community to enjoy our state’s official team sport.”

She adds the island’s canoe culture is an important part of carrying on the Hawaiian tradition of seafaring and having a space in Kona for people of all ages to participate in competitive canoe paddling is tantamount. “We have to get regattas happening here again or we’re going to lose our West Side keiki to other sports. Without the excitement of competition, they will drift away.”

Echoing the importance of regatta racing in Kona, Puamaile Kimitete, president of Kai’Ehihi Outrigger Team, adds, “The KBRC project is very dear to our hearts and we’re looking forward to the course becoming open to our local community of paddlers. One of our top Hawai‘i sports is hoe va‘a (canoe paddling)—it allows us to move together as a family from our kamali‘i (children) to kupuna (elders).”

The estimated \$85K project received a \$30K contribution from an anonymous donor. The three Kona clubs have pledged to raise the remainder of the money needed and recently launched a joint GoFundMe site. Everyone who loves the sport of paddling and the benefits it brings, are asked to help the cause at [DonateKailuaBayRegattaCourse](#)

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