



Pacific Tsunami Museum

Full Mitigation Best Practice Story

State-wide, Hawaii



Hilo, HI – Tsunamis are as much a part of the Hawaiian history as the islands themselves and the deadliest of all Hawaiian natural disasters. The State is identified by the scientific community as the “tsunami capital of the world.” But with the population of Hilo grown to almost 40,000 people, there are now two generations of children with no experience of tsunamis.

In the last 74 years, 230 lives have been lost due to tsunamis, with property damage exceeding 60 million dollars in the last 30 years. The most devastating occurred on April 1, 1946. Dubbed the “April Fools’ Day” tsunami, it claimed 159 Hawaiians’ lives with 96 of those in Hilo alone. Property damage was in excess of 26 million dollars.

During a 1993 festival held in Hilo, a group of local residents were sharing stories of tsunami experiences. Jeanne Branch Johnston who had survived the 1946 event thought “we should have a tsunami museum.” With the influx of residents and the propensity for people to gravitate to the coastlines, it was extremely important to have an educational means available.

Johnston, with assistance from Dr. Walter Dudley, professor of oceanography at the University of Hawaii at Hilo, and co-author of the book, "TSUNAMI", and the provost of the University of Hawaii at Hilo, formed a non-profit organization. The First Hawaiian Bank donated their building worth over 1 million dollars to the organization. Renovations of the building began after a grant from the Federal Emergency Management Agency’s Hazard Mitigation Grant Program (HMGP) was approved. The interior of the building was completely restored by volunteers and prisoners.

Grant monies provided exhibit and outreach education support for adults and children in many categories. A computer system with desktop publishing capabilities, a CD-FOM writer, and audio/video editing was installed. A library of videos contains educational materials. Large exhibits have been developed. Books, articles, displays, and other items are now in place. The website developed, www.tsunami.org, benefits virtual visitors unable to come in person.

After opening in June of 1998, the museum has had over 17,000 visitors. School groups from across the State and mainland come to the museum to study and learn the need for awareness and preparedness. Many of the programs at the museum are now being used as part of the permanent academic curriculum.

Volunteer Director Donna Saiki said, “People come here to re-connect with their history.” The entire museum staff is composed of volunteer docents who spend hours educating visitors. Many of the island’s elders come and share their tsunami stories. Saiki stated, “No one in Hawaii should die because of a tsunami.”

Activity/Project Location

Geographical Area: **State-wide**

FEMA Region: **Region IX**

State: **Hawaii**

Key Activity/Project Information

Sector: **Public**
Hazard Type: **Flooding; Tsunami**
Activity/Project Type: **Education/Outreach/Public Awareness**
Activity/Project Start Date: **06/1997**
Activity/Project End Date: **Ongoing**
Funding Source: **Hazard Mitigation Grant Program (HMGP); Local Sources**
Funding Recipient: **Non profit - Environmental**
Funding Recipient Name: **Pacific Tsunami Museum**

Activity/Project Economic Analysis

Cost: **\$1,224,200.00 (Actual)**
Non FEMA Cost:

Activity/Project Disaster Information

Mitigation Resulted From Federal
Disaster? **Unknown**
Value Tested By Disaster? **Unknown**
Repetitive Loss Property? **Unknown**

Reference URLs

Reference URL 1: <http://www.fema.gov/business/nfip/>
Reference URL 2: <http://www.soest.hawaii.edu/tsunami/>

Main Points

- Tsunamis are the deadliest of all Hawaiian natural disasters. But with the population of Hilo grown to almost 40,000 people, there are now two generations of children with no experience of tsunamis.
- During a 1993 festival held in Hilo, a group of local residents were sharing stories of tsunami experiences. Jeanne Branch Johnston, who had survived the 1946 event, thought "we should have a tsunami museum."
- A non-profit group was formed and a building donated for the museum.
- Renovations were funded by FEMA's HMGP grant money and work was done by volunteers and prisoner labor.
- After opening in June of 1998, the museum has had over 17,000 visitors. School groups from across the State and mainland come to the museum to study and learn the need for awareness and preparedness.
- Volunteer Director Donna Saiki said, "People come here to re-connect with their history. No one in Hawaii should die because of a tsunami."



Pacific Tsunami Museum Exterior View.