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## Kapi'olani Blvd. tops list of accident sites

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Which of these 14 accident-prone city street locations on O'ahu do you like the least?

By [Mike Leidemann](#)

Advertiser Transportation Writer

More than 60 major accidents along four-block stretch of **Kapi'olani**

Most freeway accidents occur near **H1 on-ramps and off-ramps**

**Pali and Likelike** account for five of top 10 O'ahu highway accident sites

Honolulu's most dangerous roadway isn't a high-speed freeway or at the intersection of two wide highways.

Instead, it's a half-mile stretch of one of the city's oldest and most beautiful streets where the speed limit is 35 mph: Kapi'olani Boulevard.

Four of Honolulu's 10 most accident-prone locations are on the tree-lined boulevard between Ke'eaumoku Street and Kalakaua Avenue. More than 60 major accidents — those involving injury or at least \$3,000 in damage — occurred in that area in a one-year period, according to an Advertiser analysis of Honolulu police traffic records.



"At least once a week, we see some kind of accident," said Elizabeth Torres, a sales associate at the Quiksilver, a surf shop at Kapi'olani and

Atkinson, where there were more than two dozen accidents in the one-year period. "Cars just coming whipping through here and nobody stops for anybody."

The Advertiser study suggests there are certain areas, characterized by high volume and complex intersections, where drivers need to take special care every day while traffic officials struggle to fix problems that have defied solutions so far.

In all, 7,275 major accidents on public roads were reported to police from August 2003 to August 2004, scattered across freeways, highways, city thoroughfares and neighborhood streets.

When it comes to city streets, by far the most concentrated clustering of serious accidents occurs in high-volume thoroughfares that crisscross urban Honolulu from downtown to Kapahulu.

Within that area, Kapi'olani Boulevard stands out for its high number of serious accidents and daily near-misses. A fifth area near the intersection of Kapi'olani and Kamake'e Street near McKinley High School also is on the list of top 10 accident sites. In all, more than 200 major accidents occurred somewhere along the Kapi'olani corridor running from Kaka'ako to Kaimuki in the one-year period reviewed by The Advertiser.

The good news: No fatal accidents have occurred in the area in years.

The numbers didn't surprise University of Hawai'i urban planning professor Karl Kim, an expert in analyzing transportation data.

"It's all volume-driven. It's one of the busiest areas in the state. You've got the gateway to Waikiki, Ala Moana Center, the Convention Center," he said. "The numbers are all about the volume and the activity in that area all day long."

### **Left-turn problem**

Alone among east-west thoroughfares in Honolulu, Kapi'olani Boulevard has two-way, undivided traffic that permits left turns into cross streets without the benefit of dedicated left-turn lanes or signals. Cars also are permitted to make left turns in either direction into the many business driveways and parking areas that line the stretch of road.

Cars can be hit broadside as they try to turn left against on-coming traffic or can be rear-ended as they wait to make the turn. Pedestrians risk being struck while they cross the street, even when they are following a "walk"

The intersection of Kapi'olani Boulevard and Atkinson Drive — adjacent to the Hawai'i Convention Center and heavily used for getting to and from Waikiki, Ala Moana Center and downtown — is among the most dangerous spots for Honolulu city traffic.

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sign.

"There are three lanes of traffic lanes going either way with so many people wanting to make left turns, right turns or just trying to get somewhere in a hurry," said city bus driver Arthur Akana, a 31-year veteran who for the past five years has been driving the A express route that includes Kapi'olani.

A driver runs a red light, ignoring a visitor from New Jersey at the intersection of Kapi'olani Boulevard and Atkinson Drive. "Traffic here is worse than anything we have in New York or New Jersey," said the visitor.

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Statistics provided to The Advertiser do not record exact locations, because police sometimes list the accident site as the nearest intersection, even when the crash occurred several hundred yards away. The statistics also do not specify details of individual accidents, and traffic engineers and researchers repeatedly warn not to read too much information into the raw accident counts.

Most accidents, they stress, are caused by bad driver behavior, not poorly designed roads or intersections.

"The driving attitudes are really different today," Akana said. "Everybody wants to beat the yellow light, get across the street, or get into and out of Waikiki as fast as possible. So they take risks."

To truly evaluate the safety of an intersection's design, researchers must filter out those and other personal factors, including speeding and alcohol use, officials said.

"For example, intoxicated drivers veer and crash at safe, straight segments or veer off the road at a turn, regardless of its design and features," said University of Hawai'i engineering professor Panos Prevedouros, who specializes in traffic analysis.

However, in the absence of detailed information available to the public, the raw numbers on traffic accident locations provide a good starting point for motorists to evaluate and change their own driving patterns and behavior, some officials said.

"At least if you know there's a problem, you can be more careful when you are going past the area," said City Councilwoman Ann Kobayashi, whose district includes the portion of Kapi'olani Boulevard with the high number of accidents.

"I always like to know where the danger lies, so I can avoid it," she said. "Personally, I don't make left turns from Kapi'olani."

### **'I almost got hit'**

If you spend only 30 minutes or so at any of the intersections in the area, you'll see the potential problems: Pedestrians regularly jaywalk. Cars waiting to make left turns often creep into the lane of

oncoming traffic. Frustrated drivers swerve around backed-up traffic or speed up to get through lights about to turn red.

"Did you see that? I almost got hit," said Chouck Fong, a visitor from Metuchen, N.J., after legally crossing Kapi'olani Boulevard at Atkinson one day last week when a car sped past her.

"He ran right through the red light. It really scared me. Traffic here is worse than anything we have in New York or New Jersey."

Bob Sakai, owner of the Tapioca Express shop on Kapi'olani opposite the convention center, sees something similar almost every day.



Bob Sakai

"It's a fast street with no speed-limit signs near here and lots of tourists, so there's going to be problems," he said.

Honolulu police, however, do not see the area as particularly bad, said Sgt. Grant Moniz, who patrols the area every day.

"We don't feel it's that big of a hot spot," Moniz said. "The accidents occur all over and it doesn't seem like we're running out to that area any more often than other places."

The raw numbers on major accidents can be misleading in some ways, Moniz said. Police have to classify an accident as major if any injury — even a bruise or a sore back — is claimed by anyone involved. And the \$3,000 damage threshold is easily reached in these days when even replacing a bumper or bent fender can cost thousands of dollars, he said.

Still, Moniz said Kapi'olani-Kalakaua is an "ugly" intersection.

"You've got people going left, right, straight and all over, with a lot of lane changes," he said. "Given all that, I think it's running as smooth as can be."

### **Problem elsewhere**

Moniz said a bigger problem for police are the intersections of Alakea and Beretania streets, which tops The Advertiser's list of accident sites, and Pi'ikoi and Young streets, which is 15th on the list.

"In those cases you have people crowding into the intersection and blocking traffic during rush hours," he said. "Then people get frustrated and aggressive."

Traffic safety officials have long said that enforcement, education and engineering all play a part in reducing the number of accidents islandwide and at specific locations.

Engineering fixes at many of the top sites on city streets are limited, however, by a lack of money and, more importantly, space.

"There's really very little you can do in areas where the new load of traffic has overwhelmed the capacity of old roads," said Ted Kawahigashi, the retired president of Austin, Tsutsumi & Associates Inc., a planning and engineering firm that often works on transportation issues.

"A while back we looked at the possibility of putting a left-turn lane in at Kapi'olani and Ke'eaumoku, but the only way to do it would have been to take out some of the big monkeypod trees on the side of the road. Nobody was willing to do that," he said.

### **What's the solution?**

So what are the possibilities for increasing safety at the city's top 10 accident sites where the problems are either unrestricted left turns or overcrowding?

"The best thing we can do is improve our data analysis," Kim said. "Without too much extra effort, we could have the best accident analysis in the world."

That type of detailed analysis could help traffic planners and engineers better evaluate possible solutions for the Kapi'olani corridor, such as increasing the number of dedicated left-turn signals or banning left turns entirely. Each has positive and negative impacts, planners said.

Installing dedicated left-turn lanes and left-turn traffic signals would almost certainly reduce the number of 90-degree accidents, in which a turning car is hit broadside by oncoming traffic.

"Our survey showed that motorists strongly disliked making left turns against three lanes of opposing through traffic," as is the case at many Kapi'olani intersections, Prevedouros said. "At busy intersections, the installation of protected left turns definitely improves safety for both motorists and pedestrians."

However, it worsens efficiency and increases delays for those on the main thoroughfare.

A busy intersection with a green-light cycle time of about 150 seconds would be reduced to about 100 seconds of through time if drivers in both directions were given the right of way to make left turns, increasing frustration and bad behavior among drivers, Prevedouros said.

"This is one of the reasons for the sluggish and relatively uncoordinated movement along Vineyard

### **Analysis of files**

The Advertiser analyzed 7,275 traffic-accident records of the Honolulu Police Department for a one-year period ending in August 2004 to derive its top 10 accident-prone locations. The analysis was done in Microsoft Excel and Access, spreadsheet and database programs.

Boulevard where most intersections have protected left lanes," he said.

Others have suggested banning left turns altogether along Kapi'olani.

"Maybe it's time to consider the simplest solution of all —banning left turns," City Councilman Charles Djou said.

### **It's an inconvenience**

Banning left turns from Kapi'olani would require motorists to instead make three right turns to head in the direction they want to go.

Merchants along both sides of Kapi'olani also are likely to complain that the change would limit access to their businesses.

"The road was designed as a commercial boulevard, so people are bound to ask why are you doing something to hurt business," Djou said.

However, state officials faced with similar opposition to banning left turns when they implemented contraflow traffic on Nimitz Highway said business for nearby merchants actually increased when the change was made.

"With more time to get to work, people also had more time to stop along the way to shop or eat," said Scott Ishikawa, spokesman for the state Department of Transportation.

Ultimately, engineering changes are likely to be only part of the solution. Changing driver behavior would have a far greater effect on reducing accidents, officials said.

"The best defense is just to educate drivers as much as you can," said Akana, the city bus driver who also sits on the O'ahu Transit Services safety committee.

"We try to educate the bus drivers about where and how the accidents are most likely to happen. At least that way, we can be extra alert in the worst areas," he said.

State and city officials are planning major new education campaigns for motorists and pedestrians in the coming year.

"I'd like to see a new 'drive friendly' campaign," said state Rep. Cynthia Thielen, whose Windward district has a high percentage of the accident sites on the highways top 10 list.

"People are so busy and focused on where they are going that they're getting into trouble. Let's drive

friendly."

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