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## PACIFIC BUSINESS NEWS

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# Hanapepe art community leads quest to revive town's economy

Pacific Business News (Honolulu) - by [Jon Letman](#) PBN Contributor

Hanapepe has always been a little, well, different.

While other Kauai towns such as Koloa, Kapaa and Kekaha evolved around sugar plantations, independent-minded Hanapepe (population: 2,200) was never known for cane.

With a history of independent entrepreneurship and labor rights activism, Hanapepe flourished during World War II as a bustling town teeming with servicemen enjoying R&R. The Hanapepe Merchant's Association dubbed it "Kauai's biggest little town."

But as commercial activity shifted to Lihue and Nawiliwili, Hanapepe was eclipsed as a center of business and trade, a trend that continued until it was devastated by Hurricane Iniki in 1992.

Even after much of Kauai had recovered from Iniki, Hanapepe continued to struggle. And while the town is showing mixed signs of revitalization, shuttered reminders of Iniki, now 15 years past, can still be seen in historic Hanapepe, a C-shaped loop along Hanapepe Road that curves off and onto the Kaunualii Highway (Route 50) as it runs between fields of coffee and sugar.

### Just passing through

Kauai's two-lane highway brings a steady stream of cars through town, but many pass without stopping, something local business owners have sought to change since the mid-1990s. Today, the Hanapepe Economic Alliance is working to revive the town, resurrecting the quirky little community as Kauai's art capital.

Joanna Carolan, owner of **Banana Patch Studio** and HEA treasurer, said the nonprofit group is seeking grants and donations to promote historic preservation, beautification, economic development and a greater awareness of Hanapepe as a visitor destination.

To that end, artist and current HEA President Arius Hopman, along with others, founded Hanapepe's Art Night, held each Friday during which the town's 15 or so galleries stay open until 9 p.m. Over the 11 years that Art Night has been staged, it has experienced varying waves of success with current trends indicating an upswing in both local and visitor activity.

"Three years ago Art Night was nuts here," said Angela Headley, gallery artist and HEA vice president. "People wanted to buy art, talk art, and you could hardly move. We thought, 'What are we going to do? We've got to tone this down.' Well, the economy did that for us, way too much."



Headley and other gallery owners point out that high attendance on Art Night doesn't necessarily equate to strong sales.

In addition to Art Night, HEA members have invested their own time and money into efforts to keep Hanapepe clean and green, maintaining trash receptacles, repairing gateway signs, adding flower boxes and planting trees with state funding through the Kaulunani Urban & Community Forestry program.

In 2004, with grants from the **Hawaii Tourism Authority** and **Kauai Office of Economic Development**, HEA mounted 14 storefront historical plaques featuring archival photos that capture Hanapepe's rich history.

One business segment that Hanapepe merchants and artists agree is underrepresented is food and drink. Even Helen Lacono, who co-owns the Hanapepe Café & Bakery with her daughter, would like to see more locally owned restaurants open.

"With some 50 percent local customers, they've helped us expand by word of mouth," Lacono said. "Still, we often have to turn people away, especially on Art Night."

Her business is growing steadily and Lacono said she is optimistic Hanapepe is at the beginning of a growth cycle.

### **Local potential**

Down the street, beside the pink derelict art deco Aloha Theatre, **Talk Story Bookstore** owner Ed Justus said the local community is Hanapepe's greatest untapped resource. He welcomes more commercial diversity and, like everyone else, more eateries as a way to solidify Hanapepe as a destination.

Along the highway side of town, businesses like **Da Imu Hut**, the Pupu Factory and well-known Hanapepe exports Lappert's Hawaii Ice Cream and the Kauai Kookie Kompany catch drive-by traffic across from a Shell service station, one of the few corporate logos in town.

Nearby at Wong's Chinese Restaurant and Omoide Bakery Delicatessen, owner Jackie Wong said that while Art Night definitely brings more diners on Friday nights, her business is down compared to five years ago. She worries about potential diners opting to pick up food at big-box stores now open in Lihue.

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