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Letter to the Editor

As I read the public discourse about the pending rail transit system, I notice one interesting point. The opponents of rail claim that it will do nothing to relieve traffic congestion, and the rail advocates don't dispute this claim. That tells me there are more issues on the table than meet the eye.

Rail opponents seem to be focused on offering real traffic solutions, such as High Occupancy Toll (HOT) lanes, that can be built at a fraction of the \$4,000 per capita that the rail system is expected to cost. Solutions that will be self supporting through tolls collected from users to cover operating and maintenance costs. And that will be accessible to emergency vehicles as well as city and school buses. And that will actually reduce commute time for those willing to pay the toll.

While rail advocates acknowledge that rail will not relieve traffic congestion, they argue that rail will offer commuters "choices". Those choices apparently do not include getting to work any faster since a rail system will have to operate somewhat like a streetcar, making frequent stops, if it is to accommodate passengers from various neighborhoods. Those choices do not include alternate routes for emergency vehicles or city buses. Nor are those choices available to commuters from the Windward side or East Oahu.

On the other hand, there are some choices that will be precluded altogether by rail. Many residents in the path of the rail system will not have the choice to stay in their homes. While the number of homes that will have to be condemned for rail right-of-way probably is statistically small, if your home is one of them statistics be damned.

Nor will Oahu's residents have any choice about surrendering \$4,000 per person which might otherwise be spent on tuition, or toward a new home, or braces for the kids, or groceries. That includes those residents - in Waimanalo, for example - who will never have convenient access to the rail system they're paying for.

So, if it's not about traffic congestion, what are the real issues and why should we spend the money? A cynic might think it was about big taxes, jobs and a ribbon-cutting ceremony. Or one might argue that rail stimulates the economy in those communities through which it passes. Such arguments might be acceptable if those were rail's marketing themes. But they're not. Rail is being sold as a transportation solution despite general acceptance on all sides that it is not.

It seems that an issue this big and expensive, one that will affect everyone on Oahu for decades, deserves serious debate and real public participation. Rather than letting ourselves be sold this project by political stakeholders who already have their minds made up, it seems we should demand that the rail issue be decided by the voters of Honolulu, through referendum. Put it on the ballot and make our elected officials convince the electorate why rail is the right thing to do.

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