

Investing in Honolulu's Future with Rail Rapid Transit

by Ron Tober, Chair of Technology Selection Panel

The City and County of Honolulu and the State of Hawaii have decided that a major investment needs to be made to improve the public transportation system in Honolulu. This investment in rapid transit will be designed to provide residents and tourists with a new choice in how they meet their daily travel needs in the congested corridor along the southern shore of the island. The investment will result in a public transportation service that will be fast, reliable, safe, comfortable and community-friendly. It will help protect the quality of life for residents; serve the needs of the critical tourist industry; and help the City and County achieve its goals to open up new areas of the island in Kapolei to future growth and development while protecting sensitive areas of the island from intense development. Because the rapid transit system will last for 50 to 100 years, it is important to insure that it will maximize the benefits it delivers while minimizing the costs involved particularly the costs of operating the system.

The need for rapid transit in Honolulu is clear. The existing urbanized area has one of the highest population densities in the US. The Bus has one of the highest ridership per capita levels of any US transit system. The existing roadway network is experiencing growing levels of traffic congestion and the ability to add additional capacity is severely limited by the availability of rights-of-way and funding. These factors point to the need to invest in a high capacity, fast and reliable transit system that will meet the community's needs in the future.

To this end, the City is engaged in a major effort to plan and design a rapid transit system. A decision has been made on the preferred route for the system. To help select the transit technology to be used, the City chose to seek the help of an independent panel of individuals with experience and knowledge of all the rapid transit technologies available today including rubber tire, steel wheel/rail, monorail and mag-lev technologies. Mayor Mufi Hannemann and the City Council each chose two members to serve on the panel and the panel then chose a fifth person to be its chair. I am honored to have been selected as panel chair and spokesperson.

The City solicited expressions of interest from transit technology suppliers worldwide. Ten suppliers submitted responses to a detailed questionnaire which covered all aspects of rapid transit systems from performance and design characteristics to costs and environmental factors. The panel conducted its primary work from Feb. 15th to the 22nd. We used a set of 21 common and sensible criteria based upon the questions asked of the technology suppliers. In addition, panel members were free to add additional criteria that they felt applied to Honolulu. The panel met publicly twice as a group during which we received public comments. In between these meetings, we conducted our own separate, independent evaluations of the information provided.

Four members of the panel independently came to the conclusion that steel wheel/rail technology was the best choice for the Honolulu rapid transit system based upon our experience and knowledge of urban transit technology and operations. One panel member, a UH-Manoa faculty member, chose rubber tire technology.

The collective reasons of the four panel members who favor steel wheel/rail for Honolulu are as follows:

- Rail is a proven technology that has by far the greatest number of in-service systems today. There are a large number of suppliers in the rail business which enhances flexibility and minimizes costs over time.
- Mag-lev has only one urban application in operation today and is not proven enough for application in Honolulu.
- Mag-lev and monorail are proprietary applications with a limited number of suppliers in business today which raises concerns about long-term costs and support.
- Rail has the best long-term operating performance characteristics including the higher passenger carrying capacity; better ride quality; lower noise impacts; better energy efficiency; lower air quality impacts; and lower long-term costs, both operating and replacement costs.

In selecting rail, we were concerned about minimizing the risks involved in building and operating a rapid transit system for Honolulu. Modern rail technology is a far cry from the elevated rail lines in New York City, Chicago and elsewhere. It is quiet, smooth and efficient. It will continue to evolve and improve in the years ahead. The majority of the panel believes that rail is the best choice for Honolulu long-term.

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