

ISLAND VOICES

Rail is Oahu's future

The mayor and five community leaders extol the necessity to stay on track on mass transit



Traffic congestion, such as shown here on the H-1 freeway, will only grow worse, making rail transit crucial, say the mayor and pro-rail advocates.

By Peter B. Carlisle, Walter Dods Jr., the Rev. Bob Nakata, Ron Taketa, Maeda Timson and John White

We need to keep Oahu moving. Traffic has us snagged in gridlock and has taken a toll on our quality of life. The status quo is simply unacceptable. After decades of studies and collaborative efforts on the federal, state and local levels, we are finally on the right path with the construction of an elevated rail system.

The Honolulu rail project, voted for by the people, has made significant progress. It has earned several key federal approvals and received \$120 million in federal funds, and is on track to receive a total of \$1.55 billion as the project progresses. Our local portion of the project's costs is already being paid for through the existing half-percent general excise and use tax (GET) surcharge. And the project broke ground in February and contracts have come in millions of dollars under budget. These milestones are the result of the work of the many people involved in the process, including various Honolulu mayors and City Councils, state and federal lawmakers, and business and community leaders — all of whom understand the importance of having a sensible option to Oahu's gridlocked streets and highways.

Never has a project undergone such public scrutiny. And rightly so, considering the project's size, cost and its overall importance to our community. The city has participated in more than 1,000 workshops, presentations and community briefings, plus nearly 600 neighborhood board meetings since the project began in 2005. This is in addition to the numerous City Council meetings and public hearings held on everything from project finances to the 20-mile alignment to the design of the stations. The project reflects the input of large and small businesses alike, communities along the alignment, our elected leaders, and some of the most experienced transit experts in the nation.

OAHU TRAFFIC WORSENING

While rail opponents last week spun various conspiracy theories on why rail transit is wrong for Oahu ("How the city misled the public," Star-Advertiser, Insight, Aug. 21), something was clearly missing from their commentary: Realistic solutions to deal with our ever-growing traffic problem.

They failed to acknowledge the severity of Honolulu's traffic congestion, which national studies show is among the worst in the nation. The 2010 INRIX Travel Time Tax study ranks Honolulu as the second-most congested city in the United States. Only Los Angeles fared worse.

With the population and jobs continuing to shift toward Leeward and Central Oahu, the commute will only get worse. Sobering statistics tell the story: Traffic will continue to worsen as our island population increases by an estimated 200,000 people by 2030. The most recent U.S. census showed Oahu's population has already increased by nearly 80,000 during the last decade alone.

Tens of thousands more vehicles will be added to our roads in the future. Critics of the project want you to believe that rail will not improve congestion — but ask them what it would be like without rail. The fact is without rail, congestion will be far worse. That fact is supported by transportation studies, and it is also just plain common sense. We need long-term traffic solutions before future congestion worsens and our quality of life further diminishes.



This rendering shows what a rail transit stop for Oahu's system might look like.

RAIL OFFERS BEST OPTION

An elevated rail system, free from congested streets and highways, offers a viable and efficient public transportation option. Keeping rail above ground rather than at street level, as some have suggested, means commuters will not be stuck in traffic or tied up in gridlock if there is an accident on the highway. Instead, trains will arrive every three minutes during peak travel times, and travelers can count on arriving at destinations on time, every time. Rail transit provides a safe and reliable alternative. And it will be affordable: fares will be the same as the city bus, and city bus passes and transfers can be used to ride rail.

Honolulu's rail system was selected after years of engineering and transit studies.

Other public transportation alternatives were carefully examined, but were deemed less reliable, less safe and far less efficient when compared with an elevated rail system. Alternatives studied included expanding the bus system, managed lanes or toll roads, and even doing nothing, known as a "no-build" option.

In addition, a panel of technical experts carefully reviewed several technologies including maglev, rubber-tired systems and more, and found that Honolulu's rail system provides the best value not just in construction but also in the operations and maintenance phases as well. Dozens of cities have chosen the same steel-on-steel technology. Proven technology with multiple vendors enhances competition, and greater competition will yield the best prices for taxpayers.

PROJECT FUELS ECONOMY

Economists say rail is the one project on Hawaii's economic horizon that can provide a much-needed boost to our local economy. Several independent job reports have already stated that rail will be one of the largest job creators for Hawaii.

An estimated 10,000 construction and non-construction-related jobs each year would be attributed to the rail construction. In addition to contractor Kiewit's initial estimate that it would staff 350 workers just for the first phase of construction of the guideway, additional subcontractors and other support staff and craft workers will be hired for the work. Those workers would then spend their wages at local businesses, fueling the state's economy and creating more jobs. It's basic economics; job creation in one sector has a ripple effect in others.

Opponents misled the public in saying that the city changed its job creation numbers from 17,000 to 10,166. The city never changed its numbers. Here are the facts: Since more jobs are generated during construction years than during the planning phases, the overall yearly estimate is roughly 10,000 each year with peak construction years hitting more than 17,000. It appears they chose to ignore the facts plainly stated in the project's Environmental Impact Statement (EIS).

Furthermore, a study by the Oahu Metropolitan Planning Organization (OMPO) revealed that by 2030, 83 percent of Oahu's jobs and 69 percent of the island's population will be located along or near the rail route. Prudent planning dictates we address the need to deal with the congestion now before it's upon us.

As with other cities nationwide, development around the transit stations, referred to as transit-oriented development, would also add billions of dollars to our economy over time. This also creates a prime opportunity for public-private partnerships, and can generate a viable mix of retail, commercial and affordable housing options.

It's time to get the economy moving in the right direction again, and rail transit offers the opportunity to make that happen.

RAIL IS A "GREEN" SOLUTION

Honolulu Rail Transit is a "green" or environmentally friendly project. Rail transit will take an estimated 40,000 vehicles off our roads each weekday in the future, reducing air pollution and greenhouse gas emissions.

Nationally, rail transit is favored by the Sierra Club. Smart growth and land use, with rail as a transportation option, will help "keep the country, country" by concentrating future planned development along Oahu's urban corridor where it belongs.

Rail's electric-powered system also offers the opportunity to use renewable energy sources, such as wind or solar power.

LAWSUIT DELAYS MEAN HIGHER COSTS

The city has done everything it can to keep this project on time and on budget. It has constantly considered ways to reduce project costs while maintaining a quality finished product. Construction contracts thus far have come in about \$300 million under budget, as companies compete for jobs in the tight economy.

Sadly, it is the opponents' recent lawsuit that could potentially cause lengthy and unnecessary project delays that would lead to cost increases. This despite the fact that the voting public has already decided twice on moving forward with rail — first in 2008 with the approval of the rail system, and then last year with the approval of the establishment of a public transit authority to oversee the project.

Unfortunately, Hawaii has a history of allowing lawsuits to delay important projects due to the special interests of a few creating needless delays and rising costs. Most of us recall what happened with H3 freeway and the Superferry. And it is taxpayers who are often left with the increased price tag. We don't need that with this project, especially in this economy.

That's why the project should keep moving as quickly and prudently as possible and remain on time and on budget. Voters made that clear when they overwhelmingly approved the creation of the Honolulu Authority for Rapid Transportation (HART), which has the single focus of oversight of the planning, construction and operations of the rail project.

It is important to understand that oversight does not end there. The Federal Transit Administration also has stringent oversight over Honolulu's rail project. The project's progress is closely monitored, its financial plans regularly reviewed and approved, and the FTA's oversight committee meets for several days each month with the project's senior management team. That federal oversight goes straight to the top: Both U.S. Transportation Secretary Ray LaHood and FTA Administrator Peter Rogoff have publicly given the Honolulu project high marks. Indeed, Secretary LaHood on his visit here in March told reporters that Honolulu's project has been "done by the book."

With the bulk of the preliminary engineering work completed and as we move into the final design and construction phase with the FTA, there are several key milestones ahead.

Utilities are being relocated and engineering testing completed in preparation of the guideway construction this fall; we are preparing for a finalized full-funding grant agreement with the FTA next year; and another series of informational town hall meetings islandwide is set to begin soon.

The good news is that the project is on track and set to open its first section from Kapolei to Aloha Stadium in 2015; then from Kapolei to Middle Street in 2017; and be fully operational in 2019.

For the past 40 years, plans to build a rail transit system on Oahu have been debated, vetted, started and stopped. During those decades and up to the present, traffic abatement measures have been expertly designed and implemented such as zipper lanes, contra flow lanes, HOV lanes and maximizing the city bus system.

However, traffic has only worsened and Oahu residents have endured growing traffic for years, hampering their quality of life. With continued growth and increased affordable housing on the Leeward side, rail is the definitive solution. Rail will move people, not cars. Rail is the answer for Oahu's future — the status quo is simply unacceptable.

KEY FACTS

- » The 20-mile alignment passes through the heavily traveled urban corridor from East Kapolei to Ala Moana Center, and will have 21 stations in key locations, including UH West Oahu, Aloha Stadium, the airport, and Downtown Honolulu.
- » The project will cost \$5.3 billion, which includes inflation and finance charges.
- » The project will be funded using two sources: Federal transit funds and the general excise tax surcharge.
- » The first phase of the system from Kapolei to Aloha Stadium is slated to open in 2015; the second section from Kapolei to Middle Street in 2017; and the system will be fully operational in 2019.
- » An estimated 10,000 construction and non-construction-related jobs would be generated each year, with peak construction years hitting more than 17,000.
- » A study by the Oahu Metropolitan Planning Organization showed that by 2030, 83 percent of Oahu's jobs and 69 percent of the island's population will be located along or near the rail route.

Source: Mayor's office



THE AUTHORS

From left: **Peter B. Carlisle** is mayor of Honolulu; **Walter Dods Jr.** is a retired banker; the **Rev. Bob Nakata** is a past Oahu president of Faith Action for Community Equity (FACE); **Ron Taketa** is financial secretary and business representative for the Hawaii Carpenters Union; **Maeda Timson** is a longtime Kapolei resident and president of GoRailGo!; and **John White** is executive director of The Pacific Resource Partnership. They are prominent community leaders from the business, labor, nonprofit and government sectors united in their support for rail transit.