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## **EIS, cost concerns could derail construction plans**

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By [Sean Hao](#)

Advertiser Staff Writer

Honolulu Mayor Mufi Hannemann's desire to break ground soon on a \$5.3 billion commuter rail line and Gov. Linda Lingle's concerns about the project's finances are on a collision course this summer.

For months Hannemann has urged residents and lawmakers to pressure Lingle to quickly sign off on the train's final environmental impact statement, once it is issued by the city. That approval would remove a major hurdle to the start of construction on the 20-mile East Kapolei to Ala Moana elevated train.

But Lingle says she wants to hold public hearings on the rail's environmental impact and conduct an analysis of the cost and revenue estimates. That could take months and won't begin until the city releases an updated financial plan for the project.

City transportation Director Wayne Yoshioka could not predict when the updated financial plan would be available. However, he objected to Lingle's notion that she needs the plan before signing off on the rail project.

"That's absurd," said Yoshioka, following a recent City Council committee hearing. "She's wrong."

The city originally wanted to break ground last December. It now appears likely that construction won't begin until fall at the earliest.

Under prior timetables the final environmental impact statement — which will assess, among other things, noise and visual impacts, residential displacements and financial costs — was supposed to be released in spring 2009. When that deadline could not be met, the release date was pushed back to last fall.

The project has been delayed in part because the route interfered with a runway airspace safety buffer near the Honolulu International Airport. The city also failed to finalize an agreement between state, city and federal agencies that establishes the framework for lessening the project's impact on cultural and historic resources.

### **pending hurdles**

Federal Transportation Administration spokesman Paul Griffo would not discuss when the final environmental impact statement might be released. However, the two outstanding issues may be close to

being resolved. **(This last sentence beginning with However is from the reporter, not Paul)**

The airport airspace issue appears to be taken care of following a city decision to move the train's route near Lagoon Drive farther mauka, said state transportation Director Brennon Morioka.

It's unlikely that change will require further environmental studies.

"Now that the runway issues have gone away, I think the potential for any additional studies from what we can tell is minimal," Morioka said. "We're not going to be the ones asking that any additional, supplemental studies be done."

The city also must execute a "programmatic agreement" with the Federal Transit Administration, Hawai'i State Historic Preservation Division, National Park Service, the Navy and the Advisory Council on Historic Preservation before the final environmental impact study can be released.

That agreement also was supposed to have been completed last year, but was delayed amid a prolonged review of measures needed to mitigate the impact of rail on historic sites. The agreement now is in its final draft and is being circulated for signatures, said the city's Yoshioka.

The State Historic Preservation Division and the Advisory Council on Historic Preservation have yet to sign the agreement, he said.

The O'ahu Island Burial Council, which is charged with protecting Native Hawaiian burials, opposes plans to run the train down Halekauwila Street in Kaka'ako, out of concern that the area's sandy soil is likely to contain high concentrations of unmarked Native Hawaiian graves.

Deborah Ward, a spokeswoman for the state Department of Land and Natural Resources, said that the state Historic Preservation Division is still consulting with various parties regarding whether the state should sign the current agreement.

## **public input**

Even if Lingle approves the project before she leaves office on Dec. 6, the environmental review process calls for a 30-day period for the public to provide comments on the project's impacts. The city then will need to respond to those comments before the federal government can provide a so-called "Record of Decision," which marks the end of the environmental review process.

The city plans to begin construction once that milestone is reached. However, opponents have made it clear that they will seek an injunction to halt the project before construction can begin. They're expected to argue that the city didn't adequately explore alternatives that were less likely to impact historical resources or that would cost less and alleviate more roadway traffic, among other things.

"We'll step in the moment the (Record of Decision) looks imminent," said Cliff Slater, a vocal opponent who advocates for a managed, elevated highway lane alternative. "It doesn't look imminent at the moment. I think it's a long way away."

The city already has set aside \$250,000 to defend an anticipated lawsuit challenging whether project

officials complied with environmental laws.

Just how much project delays could cost is unknown. Earlier this year the city said a delay could cost \$100 million a year. However, Yoshioka would not provide an estimate on how much delays could cost.

"We're just going to have to see," Yoshioka said.

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