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Honolulu rail project will have to pick up tab for airport route fix

By: Sean Hao, Honolulu Advertiser

The city, not the state, will have to pay to resolve the issue of a planned commuter rail line running too close to the Honolulu International Airport, according to a Nov. 3 letter from the state Department of Transportation.

City, state and federal officials met last week to discuss the problem of Honolulu's new elevated rail line encroaching on runway airspace. The problem could be fixed by moving the two closest runways or moving the proposed rail line.

The issue remained unresolved following last week's meeting, said state transportation Director Brennon Morioka.

The city wants to move the runways, according to the letter from Morioka to the Federal Transit Administration. Whether the decision is made to move the runways or some other alternative is selected, the city will be responsible for covering the costs, Morioka said in the letter, which was released by the city this week.

"The city will fund the runway relocations or alternative proposed by the city," the letter stated.

City Councilman Romy Cachola said yesterday that the council has not been briefed by city officials on how much it will cost to move the runways or come up with an alternative solution.

"The issue about the airport and all that, we were not updated on that," Cachola said. "It's only now that we're learning about this. They've known about these things all along and it's only now that we're hearing about it."

City Transportation Director Wayne Yoshioka was unavailable for comment yesterday. In a letter to The Advertiser earlier this week, Yoshioka said the city has been talking with federal and state officials for several years about the rail route and airport. Yoshioka said city and federal officials "are working on a timely resolution to this issue that all parties can agree on soon."

The city hopes to move runway 22R/4L about 750 feet makai and the adjacent 22L/4R runway 300 feet makai, according to the Nov. 3 letter from Morioka.

Under current plans, the elevated train track and a station planned for the intersection near Aolele Street and Lagoon Drive would be at least four stories tall and less than 1,000 feet from airport runways. That encroaches on a runway airspace buffer designed to keep buildings and other obstructions from affecting airplane operations.

moving quickly

Construction of the $5.3 billion rail system was to have begun in December but the project cannot proceed until the airport issue is resolved and Gov. Linda Lingle has signed off on an environmental impact study.

Morioka said state, city and federal officials are moving quickly to resolve the airport issue.

"We had a very productive meeting last week (and) we made a lot of progress in talking through some of the issues, but there are a couple of issues that still need further evaluation by the technical folks by both the (Federal Aviation Administration) and the city's consultants," Morioka said. "Everybody is in agreement that yes we should work quickly in trying to resolve this, but we also want to make sure we're not rushing things because we need to make sure we're doing things right."

The City Council voted in January 2009 to divert the path of the train from Salt Lake to the airport. That change adds about $220 million to the cost of the 20-mile East Kapolei-to-Ala Moana project, but is expected to generate higher ridership and greater community acceptance.

That $220 million in added costs does not include the price of making changes at the airport to accommodate rail, Cachola said. A city agreement to pay for airport changes should have been disclosed by city officials much sooner, said Cachola, who had pushed for the Salt Lake alternative.

City officials have said the complications are a result of newly adopted federal aviation regulations — a charge the FAA has denied.

Based on the Nov. 3 letter and information provided by the state Department of Transportation, it appears the city based its initial analysis of the impacts of rail on an outdated airport layout plan.

outdated plan used

In a his letter to The Advertiser, Yoshioka said the city conducted an airspace analysis of the route that was given to the state Department of Transportation in May 2008 and the FAA in mid-2009.

"Neither the FAA nor HDOT at the time commented about conflicts with the runway protection zone in our airspace study," Yo-shi-oka wrote. "The issue was actually brought up by a Federal Transit Administration consultant. When we were made aware of this in mid-2009, we moved promptly to work with the agencies to address it."

The airport layout plan used by the city for its analysis was drafted in the mid-1990s and had not been updated to reflect subsequent changes in runway protection zones, Morioka said.

"The city was using the older version that is currently in existence," Morioka said. "It did reflect an RPZ — runway protection zone — of a thousand feet, but my understanding is ... the FAA had made the change to the RPZ requirements for the larger aircraft to 1,700 feet back in 1994 or 1997."

In the Nov. 3 letter to the FTA, Morioka said that the city's plan to move the runways was reasonable, but would require an

environmental review.
That position has not changed, he said.
"We would support the concept if that is the route that is in the best interest of the rail facility and the airport," he said this week. "But, depending on how you do things, there are going to be certain impacts and these impacts need to be mitigated and so those are some of the issues that are currently being evaluated and discussed by all the parties — the city, DOT, FAA and FTA. "At some point in the very near future we are going to have to get together to talk about the findings and then figure out where we go from there."

No end in sight for federal rail approval; City officials cite airport violation with or without rail

By: Adrienne LaFrance, Honolulu Weekly

With each delay along the way, the City's mantra about its multibillion-dollar rail proposal remains unwavering.

"We're still on target," said Mayor Mufi Hannemann on Saturday, following last week's multi-agency meeting that could lead to an alteration in the 20-mile rail system's route. "These delays happen. I'm told that in every city throughout America, it happens this way."

While Hannemann described this part of the process as the "home stretch" before the Federal Transit Administration's authorization of the project's Federal Environmental Impact Statement, FTA officials suggest the document's release is not imminent.

"It was never the plan that this technical meeting would result in the immediate release of the FEIS," wrote FTA spokesman Paul Griffo in an e-mail. "FTA will continue to work with Honolulu city and county officials to help achieve our mutual goal to complete the environmental work necessary to move the High-Capacity Corridor project forward."

FAA officials are also rejecting the City's claim, printed in a news release from the mayor's office March 13, that "newly adopted federal aviation regulations have made the review more complex."

"Anything that says the delay is due to new FAA regulations [is] just flat-out wrong," said FAA spokesman Ian Gregor.

The closed meeting last week brought together officials from the City, the State Department of Transportation, the Federal Aviation Administration and the Federal Transit Administration.

"The meeting helped to identify the technical issues that need to be worked on," said Honolulu Transportation Director Wayne Yoshioka. "There are little issues that are overwhelming to overcome, so we'll let the technical staff work on it and we'll give them the space to do that."

Among these issues is the rail line's possible encroachment on Runway Protection Zones at Honolulu International Airport–a possible public safety issue that Yoshioka says extends beyond the rail project.

"We found that, even if we weren't there, they would still be in violation of the RPZ," said Yoshioka. "We were the ones who alerted the airport that they were already in violation."

Yoshioka says the airport's alleged violation comes as a result of the same regulations changes the City cited in its news release.

"In 2007, the FAA increased the length of the Runway Protection Zone," said Yoshioka. "Our consultant found that the airport is in violation of that required RPZ."

Officials from the FAA and the State Department of Transportation did not return the *Weekly's* repeated requests for comment on Runway Protection Zones.

With regard to the rail project, Hannemann said the City has been in talks with Federal Aviation Administration officials about possible problems with the route's positioning near the airport for years, but had to wait until the Federal Transit Administration gave City transit planners the go-ahead to meet on how best to address technicalities.

"This is not an FAA document," said Hannemann of the Federal Environmental Impact Statement. "This is an FTA document. If FTA raised these kinds of concerns, we'd be in deep trouble, deep trouble. But we're not."

And while they won't elaborate on what they're exploring–Honolulu Managing Director Kirk Caldwell says to do so would amount only to "speculating" at this point–City officials say there are now several options on the table.

"We'll do whatever it takes to ameliorate the concerns," said Hannemann. "As long as–if there's going to be additional expense–it can be justified."

The City won't publicly set a target-date for the project's groundbreaking, once slated for late last year, but Hannemann said it's a priority to prevent further delays.

"These processes are long and drawn-out by nature," said Caldwell. "We're not going to rush the process any more than we already are."

Without disclosing when the long-awaited FEIS might be made public, officials will say it will be at least years before construction can begin.

"This thing would be under construction near 2014," said Yoshioka. "We're not even close to that now."