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Honolulu rail route too close to runways, may have to shift

City, state, federal officials will discuss options today

View maps: <http://www.honoluluadvertiser.com/article/20100317/NEWS01/3170349/Honolulu+rail+route+too+close+to+runways++may+have+to+shift>

By [Sean Hao](#)
Advertiser Staff Writer

The city's planned route for a new \$5.3 billion rail system runs too close to runways at Honolulu International Airport, and that has become a major sticking point holding up the project.

City, state and federal officials will meet today to discuss how the train can serve Honolulu International Airport without encroaching on airspace that's reserved for airport operations.

The current route down Aolele Street through Ke'ehi Lagoon Park will need to be moved mauka or will require changes to the airport including runway alterations, according to government officials .

The airport issue could delay the city's release of a final environmental impact statement, which is needed before construction can begin.

The delay "could be anything from probably a week from now to getting delayed three to six months," said City Council Chairman Todd Apo, who was one of four council members briefed on the issue by the Federal Transit Administration last week in Washington, D.C. "If the FAA (Federal Aviation Administration) says you've got to move your rail line, then there will probably need to be a change to the rail EIS, which will add three to six months and possibly more depending on what issues are crossed when you go on to that analysis."

Possible route changes as well as the impact of alternate routes will be discussed at today's meeting between the state Department of Transportation, FAA, FTA and the city.

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

"The current plan that goes down Aolele does impact the runway protection zone," he said. "Basically you can't construct in the runway protection zone."

"This is a structure that would be just as high as the (nearby highway) viaduct, but it would be much closer to the runway."

The city planned to break ground on the rail project last December; however, that was delayed by a prolonged review of the project's environmental impacts. The airport issue is now the main hang-up preventing the release of the project's final environmental impact statement.

timeline up in air

Once the EIS is finished, it must be approved by Gov. Linda Lingle before the city can start construction on the East Kapolei to Ala Moana project.

How long it will take to address the airport concerns and when construction on the project can begin depends on how soon the environmental impact study is released. That in turn depends on whether the city will need to change the current route in the airport area.

The FAA today will give the city the results of a preliminary review of the impacts of five possible rail alignments on airport operations, said FAA spokesman Ian Gregor. The agency would not disclose the routes considered or their airport impacts.

"We'll submit formal comments on the project's environmental impact statement within the next few weeks," Gregor said in an e-mail yesterday. "Until then, we cannot comment publicly on our preliminary review."

The City Council voted to divert the path of the train from Salt Lake to the airport in January 2009. That change added about \$220 million to the cost of the project, but was expected to generate higher ridership and greater community acceptance.

Options that the city could pursue to mitigate the train's airport impacts include moving the train's route closer to or on top of the Nimitz viaduct. The city also may be able to stick with the currently planned route, if the state is willing to make changes at the airport such as extending the length of the opposite ends of affected runways.

Whether to allow the city to build in the runway protection zone is up to the state, the FAA said. The state said what happens next depends on what the city decides to do, based on today's meeting.

"We're helping (the city) with that evaluation so that they have all the information they need to help them make a well-informed decision on which route is going to be best for this area," state transportation director Morioka said "How much editing that needs to be done in the final EIS in this area really depends on what choices are made so

that's part of the process we're going through right now."

City transportation director Wayne Yoshioka was unavailable for comment yesterday. However, it appears the city is not expecting to alter the train's route. Honolulu Mayor Mufi Hannemann on Saturday said the rail project was in the "home stretch" of the environmental impact study process.

"It is our expectation that no more studies or analyses will be needed after the meeting (today), since this issue will have been thoroughly examined," Hannemann said in a news release. "All parties are committed to completing the FEIS (final environmental impact statement) for release. We are optimistic that, shortly after the conclusion of the airport issue, the FTA will authorize the release of the FEIS."

still major issue

Council members Romy Cachola and Ann Kobayashi, who also met with the FTA last week, said their impression was that the runway protection zone encroachment remains a major, unresolved issue.

"It's a big issue in the sense that we were told that without the FAA signing off, nothing will happen," said councilman Romy Cachola. The city "has to do something to correct it."

The airport issue as well as mitigation of the train's impact on mauka to makai views and historic sites still need to be addressed, Kobayashi said.

"For the (environmental impact study) this airport thing has to be settled," she said. "It'll be awhile. You can't just rush into things."

Today's meeting is closed to the public, and no City Council representative will attend.

Council member Ikaika Anderson, who also met with the FTA last week, said he unsuccessfully sought permission from the Hannemann administration to have the council represented at today's meeting.

"The administration did say they would share the results of that meeting and any documents that come out of it," Anderson said. "The reason that the council wants transparency on this issue is so that the public trust remains there ... so that the public has trust in its government."

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Hawaii excise tax may rise to 5% if move in Legislature succeeds

2 committees agree to raise it 1 percentage point through December 2012

By [Derrick DePledge](#)

Advertiser Government Writer

State senators yesterday moved toward a general excise tax increase to help with the state's budget deficit after finding that targeted tax hikes on businesses would likely be passed on to consumers and could undermine economic growth.

The Senate Economic Development and Technology Committee and the Senate Commerce and Consumer Protection Committee agreed to increase the general excise tax by 1 percentage point through December 2012.

The tax, the state's largest source of revenue, would rise from 4 percent to 5 percent — 5.5 percent on O'ahu because of a surcharge to finance Honolulu's mass-transit project. The increase could raise about \$500 million a year to help close the state's \$1.2 billion budget deficit.

Senators said they were concerned about the impact on the poor, since the general excise tax is regressive, and said they would provide a state earned-income tax credit. The tax credit would reduce the amount of GET revenue available to pay off the deficit.

"Good tax policy, I've always been taught, is as broad a reach as possible, and you try to make it fair across the board," said state Sen. Rosalyn Baker, D-5th (W. Maui, S. Maui), the chairwoman of the Senate Commerce and Consumer Protection Committee.

The committees' decision creates a potential rift with Senate and House leaders, who have downplayed a GET increase as an option to pay down the deficit and who say they doubt they have the two-thirds' votes necessary to overcome a veto by Gov. Linda Lingle even if a bill were to pass.

The Republican governor and majority Democrats in the House have offered budget drafts that do not rely on a GET hike to close the deficit.

State Sen. Donna Mercado Kim, D-14th (Hālawa, Moanalua, Kamehameha Heights), the chairwoman of the Senate Ways and Means Committee, questioned why the senators would move the proposal to her committee.

"My interest is to try to balance the budget and to make sure that our solutions are realistic and, at the end of the day, we're not going to be left with a vetoed measure that we can't override," she said.

State Senate President Colleen Hanabusa, D-21st (Nānākuli, Mākaha), said she will wait to see how the Senate Ways and Means Committee deals with the issue.

"I'm not sure that we have the votes to override a veto on that," she said.

State House Speaker Calvin Say, D-20th (St. Louis Heights, Pālolo Valley, Wilhelmina Rise), also said he believes a GET increase lacks support in the House.

house version

The Senate passed a GET hike last session to help finance public education and tax credits for the poor and middle class, but the bill did not advance in the House. The bill remains alive as an option this session, however, no matter the fate of the new proposal in the Senate.

"I don't want to go down a path where I don't have the 34 votes to override," Say told The Advertiser's editorial board, referring to the two-thirds' vote of the 51-member House required to overcome a veto.

Many lawmakers say they believe a GET hike will be politically difficult in an election year without the buy-in among community leaders. The Chamber of Commerce of Hawaii is expected to discuss the different tax options at a board meeting tomorrow. The Hawai'i Government Employees Association, the state's largest public-sector union, has urged lawmakers to adopt a GET increase to help avoid further cuts to state programs.

Several economists have also told lawmakers that temporary tax increases and diverting money from special funds should be part of the plan to close the deficit. Economists have noted that 38 percent of the general excise tax is paid by tourists, so residents would not absorb the full burden of a GET increase.

But the Tax Foundation of Hawaii argues that raising the GET, because of its pyramiding characteristic, could have a "devastating impact" on the state's economic recovery. The foundation's officials say taking money from special funds and curtailing tax credits would be better options.

"I guess the question for the broader community is when you look at the alternatives that are in front of you, and the impacts on business and on the consumer, you just have to sort of ask them, 'How would you rather we solve this

problem?" asked state Sen. Carol Fukunaga, D-11th (Makiki, Pāwa'a), the chairwoman of the Senate Economic Development and Technology Committee.

other tax options

The House moved a menu of tax options over to the Senate to help with the deficit, but Senate committees are narrowing those options before the bills reach the pivotal Senate Ways and Means Committee.

Fukunaga and Baker swapped the GET increase for a House proposal to generate \$100 million a year by eliminating GET exemptions on a range of business activities and imposing a 1 percent GET on those activities.

Fukunaga also substituted her Streamlined Sales Tax Project — which would collect use taxes owed on consumer mail-order catalog and Internet purchases — for a House proposal to defer high-technology investment tax credits in the program known as Act 221.

Fukunaga also held a House bill that would reduce Act 221 tax credits.

Baker's committee held a House bill that would have increased insurance premium tax rates, while Baker and the Senate Health Committee tabled a House bill that would have imposed an insurance premium tax on the Hawaii Medical Service Association and Kaiser Permanente.

HMSA and Kaiser warned lawmakers that the insurance premium tax would be passed on to businesses and would raise already escalating health care costs.

Fukunaga said many of the House tax options would create "severe long-term economic impacts" on businesses and were not as preferable as a temporary GET increase.

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