General Comments on the Honolulu High-Capacity Transit Corridor Project Draft Environmental Impact Statement (EIS)

Provided by:

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It is necessary to preface my general and specific comments to the draft EIS because, although I remain a strong supporter of fixed-rail, I have become disillusioned by the way in which the project has been handled by the administration of the City and County of Honolulu (the City) and the Honolulu City Council. I am a former member of the Committee for Balanced Transportation (CBT), which was formed as a non-partisan tax-exempt group to foster education for integrated transportation and advocate for a rapid transit system for the island of O'ahu. To assist with that goal, a small grant was received a few years ago from the American Public Transportation Association and (perhaps) $2,000 remained as of mid-2008. I terminated my CBT membership when I learned in December through a newspaper article that more than $342,000 (from "contributions" made by transit contractors and their employees and Outrigger Enterprises Inc.) had been "funneled through" the CBT in its "Go Rail Go" guise to back the City's steel wheel on steel rail (SWSR) advocacy. I also was (perhaps I still am) a member of the Transit Solutions Advisory Committee (TSAC; now known as the Transit Advisory Committee) formed by Mayor Mufi Hannemann. There have been no TSAC meetings in the past several months or, if there have been meetings, I have not received an invitation. While a member of the CBT, I also served as a CBT representative to the Citizen Advisory Committee (CAC) of the O'ahu Metropolitan Planning Organization.

As much as I would have liked to continue my (completely voluntary) effort as a member of the City's team, the change in my status stems from my public support for a fair and open competition among all transit system suppliers that qualified, based on the City's own criteria in its Request for Information. I believe that the HSST urban magnetic levitation (mag-lev) system currently operating in Nagoya, Japan would be a strong competitor—if allowed to compete. It also is necessary for me to state that I have no formal connection with the HSST's supplier, Mitsubishi-Itochu, and have not and will not receive any compensation from their companies. My sole intention is seeing Honolulu obtain the best transit system at the best price.

Presumably, the City is meeting all of the legal requirements of the Federal Transit Administration (FTA) before it pursues federal funding for the transit project. It is, however, apparently ignoring the "spirit" of FTA guidelines while following a course of action that is not in the best interests of O'ahu taxpayers and commuters. The EIS must be modified to cover all qualifying rail systems—even if it means additional expenditure of planning and analysis funds

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and a delay in the document's completion. (Personally, I feel that the contracted analytical team should have produced a comprehensive product with funding allocated to date.) One has to be impressed by the number of analysts who have worked on this project and their levels of education and experience (as given in the draft EIS)—but one also has to wonder at the seeming lack of imagination and vision shown by the city. Based on what is contained in the draft EIS, particularly in documents from two to three years ago, it appears that the whole process was used to orchestrate for an SWSR system.

My support for the HSST actually stems from a trip to Japan made by Mayor Hannemann and three members of the City Council in 2005. They praised the HSST and were even pictured demonstrating how little effort it took to move the (levitated) 52-ton train (Honolulu Star-Bulletin, October 2005). I then started research into learning more about an urban mag-lev, leading to my advocacy. Both high-speed and urban mag-lev systems operate or are under development in several nations and will undoubtedly continue to proliferate. The Maglev 2008 Conference in San Diego in December demonstrated the level of interest in modernizing U.S. transportation systems. Critics of the mag-lev cite the thousands of miles of steel rail tracks throughout the continental United States that would no longer be of use, leading to the extra expense of building mag-lev guideways. There is no such concern on the island of O'ahu, where we will "start from scratch." Implementation of a modern mag-lev system in Honolulu would not only be effective but would, in fact, be an attraction for this tourism-oriented city.

Concerning the document, a general statement on property acquisition is needed. The tables and paragraphs in Chapter 4 are all based solely on an SWSR system. The numbers would probably apply as well to a rubber tire on concrete rail system but would likely be lower for both monorail and mag-lev systems, which require less space along their guideways.

The discussions in Chapter 5 concerning acquisition of properties, including some of historical significance, are all applicable only to SWSR systems. Analysis of impacts on these properties must be made for each of the other forms of fixed-rail. In the cases of the monorail and mag-lev, the impact would certainly be lessened because of the (relatively) narrower width of their guideways.

The discussion on costs in Chapter 6 applies only to SWSR systems. Rather than comment specifically on each section of the chapter as well as the costs given elsewhere in the document, the following is a summation of the major costs associated with implementation of the HSST urban mag-lev system. (NOTE: I did not find detailed costs for the Hitachi monorail—and will leave any justification for that system up to its supplier. The costs for the HSST are based on presentations made by Itochu representatives to the Honolulu City Council.)

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The draft EIS lists costs for the (now selected) Airport Alternative at $5.433 billion. A steel wheels bridge construction (using 49 percent of total cost) would be $2.662 billion, or a cost per mile of $133 million. The HSST supplier estimates construction for the mag-lev guideway would be $570 million less, or $2.092 billion, resulting in a cost per mile of $105 million. Using the steel wheels budget of $2.662 billion, at least 25 miles of mag-lev guideway could be built (i.e., enough to reach the campus of the University of Hawaii [UH] in Manoa, an important link for ridership, with spurs to the Salt Lake Shopping Center and Waikiki).

Operations and maintenance (O&M) costs also will be cheaper using the HSST. Despite a need for about ten percent additional electricity to levitate the train, the virtually frictionless running of the mag-lev is estimated at 20 to 30 percent less (than an SWSR system) per year. Enormous savings would be realized over 30 years, considerably easing the burden on taxpayers' funding for the transit subsidy. O&M cost comparisons are given on page 8 of the specific comments, for EIS page 6-7. O&M costs savings alone would enable guideway extension into Central O'ahu, a major ridership area. Given the significant savings that can be realized with the HSST, how is it possible for the City to justify limiting the competition to SWSR systems?

The City's plan also is disappointing in its lack of any foresight for some form of express service, which would be likely to create a significant boost in ridership—particularly from West O'ahu into Downtown Honolulu and (eventually) UH and Waikiki. The EIS mentions more than once the possibility of having train operators. Any modern system should be capable of fully automated operations controlled from the transit operations center, and an operator would do nothing more than add to O&M costs.

I remain hopeful that the City will realize that the present course of action is detrimental to the best interests of the taxpayers and commuters of O'ahu, and will pursue a fair and open competition among all qualified transit system suppliers. This can be accomplished by not "tailoring" the specifications (particularly for the guideway) to favor SWSR systems, and by placing a statement prominently up front in any Request for Proposals that states something like "All guideway developers and transit system suppliers that qualified under the City's Request for Information are invited to bid."

IT IS TIME FOR A 21ST CENTURY SOLUTION!

I will end my general comments with the following extract from President Barack Obama's Inaugural Address: "And those of us who manage the public's dollars will be held to account, to spend wisely, reform bad habits, and do our business in the light of day, because only then can we restore the vital trust between a people and their government."

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