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Mayor cites cost of rail delay

By Sean Hao
Advertiser Staff Writer

Delaying Honolulu's planned elevated commuter rail project could cost the city an additional $200 million a year, Mayor Mufi Hannemann said yesterday.

Hannemann also declined to speculate whether a delay in the project's groundbreaking would affect his political plans. Hannemann is widely expected to be a candidate for governor. The filing deadline for the seat is July 20. If Hannemann were to run for governor, he would have to resign as mayor by July 20.

"My focus is on this job," Hannemann said during a news conference about rail yesterday at Honolulu Hale. "I have no thoughts of resigning any time soon because I want to go to another job."

Whether construction on rail, the mayor's signature project, will be under way by mid-July is uncertain.

Ground-breaking on the $5.3 billion, East Kapolei-to-Ala Moana rail project was expected to happen in December, but has been indefinitely delayed while the city seeks approval of the project's environmental impact statement by federal agencies.

Hannemann, who met with congressional and federal transportation officials in Washington, D.C., last week, said there did not appear to be any indication that the release of the environmental impact statement would be significantly delayed. However, Hannemann reiterated concerns that Gov. Linda Lingle could delay the project by refusing to approve the document expeditiously.

Lingle has said she will conduct a thorough analysis of the environmental study to make sure that the project's financial plan is feasible and that alternatives were adequately considered.

Lingle last week hosted an information briefing during which members of the American Institute of Architects Hawai'i chapter said the city could save money and preserve scenic views by building half of the rail system at street level. The group claims a review of such an alternative could take six months. Hannemann said such a review would take years, cost hundreds of millions of dollars, and could kill the project.

Hannemann yesterday also highlighted a recently released legislative construction industry task force report that recommended rail as one of the top ways to stimulate economic activity.

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