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Sent: 8/26/2010 1:38:00 AM
Subject: Lingle Says Rail Approval May Have To Wait For Next Governor - Honolulu Star-Advertiser

Lingle Says Rail Approval May Have To Wait For Next Governor (HONSTAD)

Lingle says rail approval may have to wait for next governor

By Sean Hao

[Honolulu Star-Advertiser](#), August 26, 2010

Gov. Linda Lingle today said a decision on whether to approve the city's \$5.5 billion rail project may be left to her successor.

The city needs Lingle's approval before proceeding with the 20-mile east Kapolei to Ala Moana elevated rail. Earlier today Sen. Daniel Inouye strongly urged the governor to sign off on the project to avoid losing a promised \$1.55 billion in federal funds.

She said she cannot sign off on rail now because the project's environmental impact statement is still being reviewed by the state Office of Environmental Quality Control.

That agency is reviewing whether public comments received through an Aug. 26 deadline are adequate, Lingle said.

Additionally, the state has yet to start its own review of the project's finances, which can take up to three months.

"I feel it's critical to have an objective financial analysis," Lingle said today following a speech in Kakaako before the Hawaii Chinese Tourism Association. "I've felt all along that an objective look at whether the people could afford it or not was important, but in light of the recent settlement with the (city and the Environmental Protection Agency) that will be billions of dollars, it's even more important now.

"So this is not going to happen any time soon and perhaps not even while my term in office is still going on."

Lingle was referring to recently announced projects needed to bring Honolulu into compliance with sewage standards that are expected to lead to 3 percent to 5 percent sewer fee increases each year for about 25 years.

Inouye and acting Mayor Kirk Caldwell urged action from Lingle they said to prevent putting \$1.55 billion in federal dollars at risk.

Caldwell today met with Inouye and Alex Keenan, clerk for the Senate Appropriations Committee Subcommittee on Transportation, Housing and Urban Development, to provide an update on the city's \$5.5 billion rail transit project.

The city is counting on \$1.55 billion in federal transit funds, but Inouye noted that the money "is not really in the bank unless we use it as soon as possible."

He noted that Hawaii is competing with all other states seeking federal transit dollars.

"At this moment, we're ahead," he said. "But if we don't take advantage of the time element, then don't look at me."

Caldwell and Inouye said the state's review is not a component of the environmental process, adding that the Federal Transit Administration and its financial consultants have already reviewed the plan and will do so again next year.

Lingle leaves office Dec. 6.

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