

A Viewpoint:

My Thoughts on Mass Transit.

By Dave Reed

As long as I can remember, Honolulu has been talking about some form of mass transit. There have been countless studies, and countless attempts to develop and fund a system that would solve all, or at least, most of our transportation concerns.

They have *all* failed.

They have failed for a multitude of reasons -- because they would have cost too much; taken too long to build; did not meet the development needs of one group or another; there was no critical mass of riders pushing the project forward; and mostly, because none of the plans met the real needs of the transporting public.

Government just did not understand – and still doesn't

Government instituted the studies; floated funding plans and options; sought Federal funding; created several ingenious plans and strategies; attempted to disrupt traffic patterns to force an acceptance of mass transit; and even hoped the recent bus strike would help convince people of the value of a mass transit rail system – and now you are talking about creating a transit authority *and* giving it the power to tax.

None of these have worked or will work in the future because Government still does not understand the real problem.

The problem is not just dealing with the number of cars on the road; it is the convenience provided by automotive travel that needs to be matched.

Although transportation experts are able to guess how many cars will be on the roads at any given time based on past experience; and they can examine bus rider records and assume projections for future bus rider use; and they can project the number of children who will be of school age and in need for transportation to and from schools – but all of this information is useless unless someone has determined actual community transportation needs in the future.

The presently proposed rail system between Kapolei and Iwilei will not take a single car off the road. It just does not go where it should.

You do not need transportation experts planning the rail or road systems for the future; you need to hear from planners and futurists.

The over-riding reason for this is, that up to the present, those putting forth traffic solutions have always come from a transportation discipline – rail experts presented rail solutions and bus proponents solutions were presented by bus enthusiasts.... as would be expected.

The plans that the City and State have been talking about are slated, if ever implemented, to be operational between 2018 to 2025, fifteen to twenty years from now and may well be obsolete long before the first person ever rides it.

Think about this:

In that same amount of time, fifteen years, transportation evolved from the horse to the horse and carriage; stagecoach; and finally set the stage for the development of the train.

Another fifteen-year span covered the first flight at Kitty Hawk to the bi-winged fighters of World War I.

At the same time that all this was happening, Henry Ford built the first economically sound automobile and the people's love affair with the car began – *a love affair that continues to this very day.*

Today, airplanes take us wherever we want to go in the world.

Cars provide each of us with the convenience of mobility and transport us in a timely fashion to almost any destination on the ground.

This is what you need to address in attempting to solve the traffic problem.

To attempt to do this with a fixed rail system, monorail, dedicated bus lane, or any other form of mass transit, the City and State must first successfully answer the following questions:

1. What will be the people's transportation need in 2025 and beyond?
2. Will office buildings in downtown Honolulu still be the major destination of a large number of workers; or will most of them work electronically from home or another geographic location?
3. Will school be taught in a physical location as it is today; or will students learn from televised lessons and perform assignments via the Internet?

Consider that the University of Hawaii, Hawaii Pacific University and University of Phoenix already operate classes taught exclusively on the Internet. Are the high schools next?

4. Will the cost of gasoline be so high that driving a car will become prohibitive; or will the auto industry devise some other fuel source that is both effective and cheap?
5. Where will people live in the future?

Consider that Mililani Town is only thirty-seven years old and Kapolei, "the second city" is even younger and still far from its potential. Who would have thought in 1968 that there would even be a need for H-2?

6. Will there be new subdivisions developed?

Where will they be located? These are key questions to answer before you decide where mass-transit will be needed.

7. Will there be a need to go shopping or will all shopping be done electronically, eliminating the need for you to go to a store?

Consider that Hawaii retailers reported that about 44% of this year's 2004 Christmas sales were made on the Internet. This fact alone may have serious impact on the State's tax revenues in the future, let alone the trend away from shopping complexes.

Additionally, consumers now shop on sites like Amazon.com and Ebay.com without a second thought. What will happen in the marketplace when our computer literate first-graders graduate?

8. The military has already devised a method to make an individual soldier “fly;” will this technology become both available and affordable to the everyday citizen in the next twenty or thirty or so years?
9. What will business be like in twenty or thirty years?

Will we still have a physical labor base employed; or will almost all Hawaii business be in the service or information sector, requiring no centralized physical location?

This is not too farfetched, when you consider that banks are already encouraging their customers to use electronic banking.

Even the City and State are relying more and more on electronics to accomplish many of the things that formerly required a physical presence.

The Post Office has felt the impact of e-mail and the cost of stamps are increasing and they are seeking other missions to maintain their own existence.

10. What will things cost in twenty or thirty years?
11. What will people’s wages be; what will their wages be based upon; and what will their disposable income be after taxes?
12. What leisure activities will people be seeking in twenty-plus years and how will they differ from today?

These things to think about are only the tip of the iceberg.

One need only use his or her imagination to conger up all kinds of other scenarios to examine before committing the City and State to such an overwhelming and expensive project.

These are important considerations because Hawaii has changed right before our eyes and it has scarcely been noticed.

In the span of the last fifty years, Hawaii's world leadership in sugar and pineapple has disappeared from the economic playing field.

The military continues to be a factor, but far less than it was during World War II and the Korean and Vietnamese conflicts – and as more and more sophisticated weapons are developed, there will be less and less need for a physical Pacific location for their deployment

Tourism is today's economic engine, but will it be for the next fifty years? I don't believe so if we continue the over commercialization of our island environment that fuels the disappearance of the Hawaiian culture that makes us so uniquely different.

These are the things that that you, our elected officials, need to contemplate as you debate the future of Honolulu's transportation needs.

You also need to be mindful that the City's present plan for the BRT will not work because it does not go to places that people need to get to – and it further reduces the number of traffic lanes available for cars and trucks further compounding the traffic problem it hoped to solve.

What will work?

To be successful, a mass transit system must effectively combine roads, rails, buses, and cars and meet individual transportation needs in cost effective and convenient way.

- Roads need to be regularly inspected and maintained.
- The Bus needs to serve two purposes – first, transporting people in a timely fashion to destinations throughout the County; and second, serving as a feeder service to the rail terminals.
- A rail system – be it light or heavy rail or monorail, must begin its construction in the major bedroom communities on Oahu.
- Major terminals should be constructed at Waianae, Nanakuli, Kapolei, UH West Oahu Campus, Ewe Beach, Waipahu – Leeward Community College, Wahiawa, Mililani, Pearlridge, Aiea, Downtown, Ala Moana, Makiki, Manoa-University of Hawaii, Kaimuki, Kahala, Aina Haina, and Hawaii Kai.

Additionally, each of these terminals need to have adequate parking facilities – with stalls equal to the relative number of cars registered in the surrounding community that are expected to use the system. Without parking, the system will fail.

The center core of this plan, Downtown, Ala Moana, Makiki and Manoa-University of Hawaii should be the LAST segments constructed, not the first.

There is no need to have a mass transit system going to or from Waikiki. Travel to and from Waikiki should continue to be handled by independent cab and bus companies – its part of the island experience.

- Construction will be faster by beginning construction in the bedroom community locations and building toward the center of town.
- Progress will be considerably more visual and there will be much less traffic disruption.
- Once they have left home, commuters will always have the “*construction area*” behind them as they travel toward Honolulu each weekday morning.
- These same commuters will also be visually aware that the City and State are doing something to address his or her concerns for a better traffic flow.
- This system will also allow for the orderly development and construction of terminal space and parking and other commuter conveniences at each of the major terminals of Waianae, Nanakuli, Kapolei, UH West Oahu Campus, Ewe Beach, Waipahu – Leeward Community College, Wahiawa, Mililani, Pearlridge, Aiea, Downtown, Ala Moana, Makiki, Manoa-University of Hawaii, Kaimuki, Kahala, Aina Haina, and Hawaii Kai.
- This also points out that the availability of land will be a major component in the success of the transit system – and so far, none of the plans I have seen or heard about have even mentioned a terminal, let alone how its land would be acquired.

The lifestyle needs of 2025 and beyond will have much to do with what is constructed in these terminals.

- It is almost certain that parking facilities will be a major factor in the terminal design – and parking needs to be free.
- Security in these parking structures will be critical to their use. No one is going to park his or her car in an unprotected parking structure that is just begging for a theft.
- Additionally, waiting areas and restroom facilities will also be needed based on the population projections of the surrounding communities.
- They will need to be ADA compliant as well.
- It may be that major shopping experiences will take place at or near these terminals instead of in the stores and shopping centers of today.
- There may also be a need for medical and other personal services to be located in these terminals.
- These terminals may also become centers for the transaction of financial, banking and real estate activities for the surrounding geographic areas.
- And in addition to the construction costs, we need to consider the cost of operations. At present \$22 million annually seems to be the figure most often mentioned. If this figure is even close to accurate, it translates into an increased tax burden of \$76.80* per household in the City and County of Honolulu – on top of existing property taxes.

*22 Million divided by 286,450 Oahu Households based on U.S. Census 2000. Assumes an even distribution of cost among all Oahu households.

How do we pay for these transportation needs?

Without a doubt, there will be a need to raise taxes.

However, the State should **not raise** the Gross Excise Tax for any mass transit needs on Oahu -- this is not a state concern and the State should not get in the middle of it.

It is a matter of “Home Rule.”

The Legislature’s only assistance should come in the form of legislation that allows for the Counties to, at their discretion, institute a sales tax of no more than one percent, levied only within their own County, dedicated to paying for the construction of a mass transit solution – and this taxing power should be limited for the duration of a predetermined construction period; after which, it is automatically eliminated.

As a sales tax, it would only be levied at the point of a retail sale – and would not apply to government purchases or business-to-business purchases (unless they were of a retail nature).

Further, the Counties desiring to institute such a sales tax must have the **tax ratified on the next election ballot** to assure that it is truly the will of the people.

Another source of revenue for the transit system should come from the selling of development rights for each of the terminal areas.

To be saleable to the public, the City and County of Honolulu must also commit a specific percentage of its total tax collections from real property to this transportation effort – without raising the residential base.

It means the Council must adopt zero-base budgeting and planning and have a willingness to eliminate those City services that are no longer feasible or relevant.

It also means that the City and County of Honolulu and the State need to work together to eliminate all of the various departments that have overlapping missions – as an example, there is no need for both the State and the City to have a Department of Transportation – Roads.

The City’s Department of Transportation should deal with all of the roads and highways and the State Department of Transportation should deal with all the Airports and Harbors.

Once this is done, the City will become accountable for both the effective development of an efficient transportation system serving Oahu and the maintenance of all of our highways and roads.

Additionally, it must be clearly understood that once this new tax is levied, an over-taxed community will tolerate no new taxes or fees of any kind or for any cause from the State or the City and County of Honolulu for the duration that it is in force. None.

A better economy, coupled with prudent Legislative and Administrative budgeting shall become the only tools available to increase future City and State revenues.

If the State and City cannot live within its revenue base (as all citizens must) there will certainly be a purging at the polls that will leave the mass transit system unfinished and in shambles – and the City near bankruptcy.

To avoid this and still be able to move forward with this and other projects, the State and the City must do everything in its power to improve the economy.

That means that **all** levels of government must become “*business friendly*” – something it has been reluctant to do in the past.

An improved economy is government’s only source of new revenues.

In the meantime, as it will take at least eight to ten years to complete an integrated transportation system in the City and County of Honolulu, there are things that the City and State can do to more immediately ease our present traffic problems.

They include:

- Examine the on and off ramps on the H-1. Many of them have little or no lead to them, creating an extremely hazardous condition every time someone enters or exits the highway.

The Diamond Head entry to H-1 at University is one example; as is the Ewe entry to H-1 at University. Both the on and off ramps at School Street are another. There are many other examples, that if corrected, would cause traffic to flow in a much more efficient manner and certainly with greater safety.

- The synchronization of stoplights by the City would also move traffic in a more effective method. At present, driving at the posted speed limits, it is impossible to make more than two green lights in a row; which of course, either snarls traffic or encourages speeding.

- It has been suggested that perhaps there is a need to physically limit the actual number of cars on Oahu and the number allowed at a single residential address with additional cars registered at a premium.

There is no Constitutional right to “own a car” detailed in the document; car ownership, like driving, is a privilege and can be regulated by the government.

The only real problem with this is that it will penalize the poor and middle class families trying to make ends meet with more than one job – and that is certainly worth addressing before acting.

It might also help in recycling, if perhaps to purchase a new car, one would have to dispose of the old car before the new car could be registered.

- Staggering State and City employee work hours so that offices open earlier and stay open longer will help.
- Moving State and County offices (or entire Departments) out of the downtown core might also be helpful.
- The government must also end subsidizing parking for its employees. If government employees had to pay market rates for parking, many more of them would be using the Bus.
- Perhaps its time to ban student cars from campuses and the surrounding neighborhoods, requiring all students to use a system of school busses.
- There needs to be a concerted effort to curb the abuse of running red lights. The police need to write more tickets for this – and make examples of the offenders – including bus drivers.
- Another thing that will go a long way toward easing traffic would be to establish a hard and fast rule that stated:

“Except for an emergency, all repairs to roads in a business district shall be made at night; and all repairs, except for an emergency in residential neighborhoods shall be made during the day.”

- Lastly, the City, State, Gas, Electric, Water, and Telephone companies need to coordinate all work that involves digging up the road and disrupting traffic; and they need to adhere to the rule above except in response to an emergency.

These last few suggestions are things that you can do right away and for the most part, cost little, if anything.

Obviously, the revisions of on and off ramps do have a price tag.

There is one last thing to consider and that is that although there are many individuals who claim that there is a great need for some form of rail transit – many of these same individuals are champions of the transit's cause because they think others will use the system, thus freeing the roads for themselves.

That's not a very good reason to spend billions of dollars.

I do not think the creation of a Transit Authority will do anything except delay action and add another layer of bureaucracy.

I do not think we need the expense in time or money for more studies.

The State and City should be able to find about twenty-one individual independent “thinkers” to come up with timely solutions and plans of action in a relative short period of time. It just takes the commitment of concerned visionaries.

Once done, **a price tag can be attached to the plan** – and only then should taxes be raised because only then you will know how much will really be needed. To do anything else is irresponsible.

In conclusion, I am neither a proponent of, nor am I opposed to some form of mass transit for Oahu.

I am a supporter of careful, thoughtful planning before any fiscal commitment or tax increase is made because what we decide today must be right.

There are no second chances.

Dave Reed

Dave Reed Marketing, Inc.
1188 Bishop Street, Suite 3511;
Honolulu, Hawaii 96813
808-537-3797
davereed@pixi.com

Dave Reed was born and raised in Hawaii and has worked in marketing and advertising and graphic design for over forty years.

The national advertising publication, Ad Day USA, nominated Dave Reed to the "Top One Hundred Creative People in America" as part of the Nation's 1976 bi-centennial celebration.

Reed was the Honolulu Advertising Federations' "Ad Man of the Year" in 1983 and the American Advertising Federations' "Silver Medal" winner for career contributions to the industry in 1992. Reed is a past President of the Advertising Agency Association of Hawaii, a past National Director of the National Advertising Agency Network, and past Chairman of the American Association of Advertising Agencies.