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FYI

Honolulu rail project architects defend plan for elevated route

By: Sean Hao, Honolulu Advertiser

A group of architects who have worked on Honolulu 's planned rail project yesterday said they support plans to build the \$5.3 billion train on an elevated guideway.

The group of about a dozen people working for eight firms distanced themselves from a position taken by the American Institute of Architects' Hawai'i chapter. The AIA is advocating that the city use flexible train technology that would allow the planned rail line to be built at ground level in Downtown Honolulu.

However, architect Stanford Lee, principal at Next Design, yesterday said he and others who have worked on the project feel the rail should be built entirely elevated. Further study of at-grade (ground-level) rail alternatives could delay and possibly derail the train project, he said.

"We're concerned that any significant delay caused by more studies could jeopardize the rail project," Lee said during a press conference at the state Capitol yesterday. "We're just saying support this project as it's been proposed in the environmental impact statement."

The group's comments follow last week's announcement by Gov. Linda Lingle that she will host a forum Monday for the AIA to discuss alternatives to the elevated rail line.

Lingle said Honolulu should consider building a portion of its commuter rail line at street level to save money and avoid putting more burden on taxpayers in a down economy. Lingle's announcement followed the recent disclosure of documents in which the Federal Transit Administration expressed concerns that Honolulu may not be able to afford the 20.5-mile train line from East Kapolei to Ala Moana.

Architectural firms represented at yesterday's Capitol news conference included: Group 70 International; Media Five Architecture; Urban Works; Pacific Architects; AM Partners; Ushijima Architects; and Yamasato, Fujiwara and Higa.

Those firms and the AIA all support rail transit. However, the AIA has said it is concerned about the costs and aesthetics of an entirely elevated rail.

Honolulu architect Scott Wilson, chairman of the AIA's transit task force, said the AIA's view represents the majority of the group's local members. The group based its support for a partially at-grade line on a survey of about 700 members, Wilson said.

"There was about 30 percent that said yeah, elevated is fine," he said. "It was clearly a definite majority did not want elevated rail."

Time for silent majority to step up on rail

Honolulu Advertiser

It smells like politics on the rail transit front. This latest twist — Gov. Linda Lingle's decision to open the Capitol auditorium to hold a forum on an alternative to the elevated rail system next week — is not the right move.

It's time for our public officials, business and community leaders who say they support the elevated system to make their voices heard.

Not only have alternatives been sufficiently studied, hundreds of hearings held, mounds of testimony recorded, a majority of voters approved the project — business leaders, labor and our entire Congressional delegation all support the rail plan — but we also are at a critical juncture where time and clarity of purpose are crucial. The draft environmental impact statement is being completed. Unneeded, protracted delays could wind up costing taxpayers in more ways than one.

The political discord does not go unnoticed in Washington by federal transit officials — and we need to capture all the federal dollars we can.

A sensible fiscal plan — one reviewed by top business leaders locally as well as federal officials — is in place with a sizeable contingency fund to deal with unforeseen costs. To be sure, concerns over declining tax revenue are justified, on this projects as

well as others. But in the case of rail, this has been offset by the lower construction costs with bids thus far coming in millions below projections.

The rail system will provide broad economic benefits when we need them most. The economy won't be in the doldrums forever, and we want Hawai'i to be well-positioned and ready to roll once things improve.

"The time for additional public hearings is over," said U.S. Sen. Daniel K. Inouye. "The time for action is now. This project will have the dual benefit of relieving traffic congestion from West O'ahu to Honolulu, while creating an estimated 10,000 jobs to get our construction sector thriving once again. It's a decade overdue. Let's get on with it," Inouye said.

The senior senator is right. Our policymakers should heed that call.

The financial plan is on firm footing, with Hawai'i's political clout in Washington. "I am committed to securing at least \$1 billion in federal funds to be matched locally to make this historic project a reality," Inouye said. "If there is more to be gotten, I will get more."

Jim Tollefson, president and CEO of the Chamber of Commerce of Hawai'i, said the Chamber and the business community support the rail project.

Tollefson said that if we had gone through with rail plans in the 1990s, the business community and the economy would have been in a much better position to weather this current fiscal storm. Visitors already comment about our choked roadways, he said.

Clearly, after decades of review the at-grade option has already been vetted by transit professionals. City officials and transit specialists have repeatedly said that an at-grade system would require more trenching, potentially having even greater impact on iwi. It would require more condemnation and disruption due to the larger footprint. And elevated rail is safer and not subject to delays in traffic, as an at-grade system would be. At-grade is simply not the way to go.

For her part, Gov. Lingle has said she supports rail — and that's a good thing. Still, she says members of the American Institute of Architects who support the at-grade system are credible and that she wants to give that option a hearing.

Have we not already done that? And there is division even within the AIA itself over what system is best.

"I am an AIA member and the AIA position does not represent me. As a transit designer, I studied the rail proposal and I support the elevated rail as the best system for Honolulu," said Honolulu architect James L. Stone.

Indeed, more than a dozen architects have stepped forward to counter the at-grade suggestion, stressing those pushing the at-grade agenda do not represent the entire group.

The case for elevated rail is clear. It provides a sensible alternative, a much needed economic boost — think jobs — and we have been studying this project for decades. It has support. It has momentum.

Despite what opponents want you to think, this is not the mayor's train. It belongs to future generations who deserve better transportation alternatives.

It's time for the silent majority and those community leaders who support this transit system to step up. Let's not let politics and a small minority of naysayers derail another worthy project for Hawai'i. We can do better than that.

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