

HONOLULU HIGH CAPACITY TRANSIT CORRIDOR PROJECT – DEIS BACKGROUND AND STATUS

Project/DEIS Background

The Honolulu High Capacity Transit Corridor Project is being developed to provide high capacity rapid transit in the congested corridor on the island of Oahu between Kapolei in the west and the University of Hawaii-Manoa and Waikiki to the east. The project corridor is approximately 23 miles long and contains the majority of the population and employment on the island of Oahu.

The Draft Environmental Impact Statement (DEIS) discusses 34 miles of potential guideway located within the corridor, but the detailed analysis discusses the core 19-20 mile segment planned for implementation under the current proposal.

The Alternative Analysis evaluated a No Build Alternative, a Transportation System Management Alternative, Managed Lane Alternatives, and Fixed Guideway Alternatives. Only the Fixed Guideway alternatives were determined to sufficiently address the purpose and need for the project and was selected as the Locally Preferred Alternative and advanced to the DEIS stage.

In addition, five transit technologies were examined:

- Light rail transit;
- Rapid rail transit (steel wheel on steel rail);
- Rubber tired guided vehicles;
- Magnetic levitation system;
- Monorail system.

A technical review panel evaluated proposals and voted four to one to select steel wheel on steel rail technology, a decision accepted by the City Government. An elevated system was also proposed as the only alternative that provides sufficient user benefits.

The DEIS examined four alternatives, including a No Build and three Fixed Guideway alternatives:

- The Salt Lake Alignment, running from the eastern terminus along Salt Lake Boulevard to Aloha Stadium, then continuing on to Kapolei in the west;
- The Airport Alignment, running from the eastern terminus to the vicinity of Honolulu International Airport, Pearl Harbor Naval Base, and the Arizona Memorial to Aloha Stadium, then continuing on to Kapolei in the west;
- An alternative including both the Salt Lake and Airport Alternatives for the section between the eastern terminus and Aloha Stadium.

The DEIS also proposed a phasing of the project along the following schedule:

- East Kapolei to Pearl Highlands

- Pearl Highlands to Aloha Stadium
- Aloha Stadium to Middle Street
- Middle Street to Ala Monoa Center

A point of discussion has been that the proposed project phasing would be built from west to east, or from the relatively undeveloped and unpopulated section of the corridor to the more populated areas to the east that contains the bulk of the origins and destinations.

When the DEIS was released for public comment in November 2008, the Locally Preferred Alternative was the Salt Lake Alignment. On January 28, 2009 the Honolulu City Council, with the agreement of Mayor Hannemann, voted to change the Locally Preferred Alternative to the Airport Alignment. How the project phasing would be conducted under the new Preferred Alternative is unknown.

Status of the DEIS

The DEIS was released in November 2008, and after an extension of the public comment period, public comment was closed during the first week in February. Over 600 commenters with 3200 individual comments were received. Staff from the City of Honolulu Rapid Transit Division (RTD) met with Region IX and TPE staff on March 9 and 10 to discuss responding to the comments received. Region IX staff also participated in coordination meetings with the National Park Service (NPS) and the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA).

Status of the FEIS

FTA received an Administrative Draft FEIS (AFEIS) in October 2009 for review and comment. Based upon public comments and agency concerns, the AFEIS included a number changes from the DEIS. Changes included: a beefed-up alternatives analysis section; the development of least harm alternatives for Section 4(f) resources and revision of the 4(f) narrative; improved noise evaluation and mitigation and clarification of significant visual impacts.

Completion of the process to develop a Section 106 Programmatic Agreement (PA) is in its final stages. There were a dozen active participants including: the U.S. Navy, the State Historic Preservation Officer (SHPO), the NPS, the Oahu Island Burial Council, the ACHP and the National Trust for Historic Preservation. Major issues were visual effects, indirect and cumulative effects around proposed station areas and effects on unknown Native Hawaiian burials and cultural resources. FTA, ACHP and the SHPO are putting the finishing touches on the Draft Final 106 PA. A proposed station touchdown on a Navy historic district is a last minute issue. The Navy is very supportive in coming to closure on the touchdown issue.

A great deal of regular interagency coordination and discussion remains as is expected on a major project, but major issues to be addressed include:

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- The NPS acknowledges that there may be impacts to be mitigated, but is very interested in the location of a station that would directly serve the Arizona Memorial area. A station is not currently proposed there, although a station would be located approximately a half a mile away.
- The EPA is interested in ensuring that there is sufficient coordination with the US Army Core of Engineers on wetlands issues and that water quality issues, noise issues, that Section 106 impacts are addressed, and that environmental justice issues are addressed in the “Banana Patch” area of Oahu.
- The Advisory Council on Historic Preservation has expressed interest in the 106 coordination process and requested information and progress updates from FTA.
- A local opposition group with a pre-determined position that the DEIS and the alternatives analysis are fatally flawed and that a managed lane solution is the answer submitted numerous comments and continues to contact FTA to express their views. FTA has referred to their comments to the NEPA process
- The general public also expressed a wide range of positions on the project, but a broad theme was the negative visual impacts of the elevated system on the scenic views of the island. This included visual impacts in general and impacts to specific designated viewsheds.

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Financial Issues/Potential Project Changes

The change in the Locally Preferred Alternative from the Salt Lake Alignment to the Airport Alignment increases the projects costs, potentially 200 million dollars or more. Combined with a financial plan that was already operating on a razor thin margin between costs and revenues and a damaged national and local economy, it is highly uncertain if the project can proceed as proposed. FTA has repeatedly advised Honolulu City and RTD staff and their consultants that if a financial shortfalls result in major changes to the project, it may be necessary to significantly revise and possibly release the revised environmental document for public comment, with resulting delays to the project.

Proposed EIS Schedule

The Honolulu RTD staff hopes to submit a draft of the FEIS in May or June of 2009 with a finalization of the FEIS in August and to receive a Record of Decision by September of 2009.

Comment [DU1]: I recommend that we do not include RTD's "hopes", but include narrative that reflects a reality based conclusion.

FTA has largely completed its review and comment of the AFEIS. Minor changes related to the Airport Alignment, and 106 and 4(f) resources will have to be included in the final document including a signed 106 PA.