



Anti-rail poll results to take politicians, voters on wild ride

By Richard Borreca, Feb 12, 2012

Honolulu's traffic problems are getting worse, but Honolulu residents remain deeply skeptical of the city's solution.

The new Honolulu Star-Advertiser/Hawaii News Now poll shows that 53 percent of Honolulu residents do not think the city should continue the project. In one year there has been an 8-percentage point shift. Last year, a similar poll had 49 percent supporting and 45 percent saying stop. That is a big swing in one year.

The reversal in public opinion is a serious blow to a project that was never more than marginally accepted.

The poll results come after everything short of having Toru Hamayasu, the Honolulu Authority for Rapid Transportation's interim executive director, coming to your house to mow the lawn and do the dishes.

The city has lobbied and devoted itself to this project through two mayors, Peter Carlisle and Mufi Hannemann. Some estimates put the taxpayer money spent on public relations at more than \$5.6 million.

Along the way, the project has been frequently criticized for the lack of openness and transparency in its planning decisions.

The problem has been that the city just can't get around the reality of the project itself.

I can say that you have to understand that elephants are big, I can argue that you must accept that elephants weigh a lot, and I can explain that elephants eat a lot — but if you don't want an elephant in your living room, there is no way I can convince you that Dumbo on the sofa is all for the good.

The same thing is happening with rail. The closer the city comes to pouring the first concrete column, the more citizens are saying "Stop."

Presumably those commuters suffering through the most tortuous traffic along the H-1 Ewa corridor, from Waianae to Pearl City, would want rail the most.

According to the poll, that group's split is 53 percent want and 45 percent don't want it. Those in Central Oahu are less supportive: just 49 percent say to keep on with the program.

Then when you get to urban Honolulu (which starts from Moanalua) and along the Windward side and the North Shore, all areas that presumably would not be helped by rail, support plummets and opposition soars.

A full 60 percent of those folks, to paraphrase Dr. Seuss, do not like rail here, they do not like it there, they do not like it anywhere. They do not like rail.

The rail supporters will argue that the public voted in favor of the steel-wheeled train on steel rails, they voted to approve a system to run the rail by approving a charter amendment and they voted for two rail supporters, Peter Carlisle and Mufi Hannemann.

Obviously, there is more to a politician's popularity and voter acceptance than one issue, but rail has become the Honolulu issue with a vocal, if not strident, opposition.

What is a politician to do? Can City Council candidates and incumbents not listen to the opposition? Can incumbents defend pro-rail votes if they represent East Hono- lulu? And can challengers get leverage by attacking an incumbent for not stopping rail?

The reverse is also true for candidates along the rail corridor: Can they promise to defend rail and win? Maybe not, because the poll shows only marginal support.

If you burrow down into the poll demographics, rail is least liked by voters who are Republican, white, Filipino or making less than \$50,000. Rail's biggest supporters are Democrats, Japanese and wealthy.

From all that, it seems that the worst mistake a politician could make in this election is ignoring rail. It is just too critical an issue to not know where you stand.

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