

Elevated rail project leads Oahu in wrong direction

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This rendering of the proposed Pearl Highlands rail station is a good example of how the project would change the landscape in ways many are unwilling to accept.

In the past year, we've editorialized four times about our growing concerns with the City and County of Honolulu's proposed elevated rail project between Kapolei and downtown.

Last June, we said the rail project "has deeper issues that no court will be able to fix." In April, we complained that Mayor **Peter Carlisle** often has lacked the communication and transparency needed to generate long-term support for the project. And, last December, we commented about the tenor of the debate: "Name-calling only wastes a lot of time and energy, and it isn't getting us anywhere."

Despite our concerns and frustrations, we continued to be supportive of the project, given Oahu's need for better traffic management and the immediate economic impact that a multibillion-dollar construction effort could have. But, after reflecting on everything that is at stake and how recent events have unfolded, we can no longer give Honolulu's elevated rail project our support.

PBN has long been in favor of mass transit, and we continue to be. We're not saying, "Don't build something." We're saying, "Don't build an elevated rail project, and don't build anything

as it's currently proposed." This project cannot be fixed, and we are extremely concerned that its enduring legacy — should construction ever start — will be as our "rail to nowhere" effort.

An elevated rail project is not the right fit for our culture and our land. Hawaii's architects have been warning us for years about the negative impact an elevated rail system would have on Oahu's landscape. And any project that doesn't help connect population centers such as Mililani, Kailua, Hawaii Kai and the University of Hawaii Manoa campus will fall well short of the stated goal of relieving traffic congestion — an aspect of the project that has become increasingly contentious.

We also have concerns about whether a city that cannot resolve its waste-water treatment capacity problems or replace its aging water pipes before they break has the ability to pull off the largest public works project in Hawaii history. At this point, we need to hear more than another chorus of "just trust us."

Changing our position on this critical issue was a difficult decision. But, after four influential leaders came out with an essay articulating their concerns about the project in the Aug. 21 Honolulu Star-Advertiser we feel the project's future is at a tipping point. And, if we don't voice our new stance on the project at this critical juncture we felt we would be remiss in our duties to help stimulate discussion among Hawaii's business decision-makers, whose voice has been largely absent so far.

The authors of the Aug. 21 commentary — former Gov. **Ben Cayetano**, former judge and Office of Hawaiian Affairs trustee **Walter Heen**, Maui Divers founder and mass-transit critic Cliff Slater and UH **William S. Richardson** School of Law professor **Randall Roth** — carry immense credibility. Heen and Roth were among the authors of the "Broken Trust" essay in the late 1990s, which helped bring reform to the management of [Kamehameha Schools](#) . So they've been down this road before. All four of the rail essay authors are plaintiffs in a lawsuit filed against the City and County of Honolulu and federal agencies earlier this year alleging violations of the National Environmental Policy Act and the National Historic Preservation Act in the preparation of an environmental impact statement for the rail project.

In court documents, the plaintiffs — part of Honolulutraffic.com — allege the defendants did not properly consider alternatives to the elevated, steel-on-steel rail system; failed to properly analyze the environmental consequences of the system; did not identify and evaluate Native Hawaiian burial sites and traditional cultural properties along the site; and, failed to account for the project's impact on at least 32 historic resources, such as Aloha Tower, Chinatown and the Pearl Harbor National Historic Landmark.

That lawsuit is still pending. But the essay brings up points that cannot be summarily dismissed. Here are some highlights:

- **Wayne Yoshioka**, recruited from rail consultant **Parsons Brinckerhoff** to head the city's Department of Transportation Services, says "traffic congestion will be worse in the future with rail than what it is today without rail." In other words, he's saying rail is going to fall well short of solving our traffic congestion problem.

- U.S. Department of Energy data shows that except in heavily populated urban centers rail uses more energy per rider than do automobiles. The smallest urban center with a rail project that is actually energy efficient is four times the size of Honolulu.
- A Federal Transit Administration probabilities study on the Honolulu rail project concluded that we're likely to spend \$7 billion on the project. And, government data says cities with rail systems have typically overestimated ridership by 41 percent.
- The City and County of Honolulu says that it will need to find another \$100 million a year to keep the trains operational once our system is built.
- The City and County of Honolulu is making a big mistake by trying to start the project before identifying culturally sensitive areas in Kakaako and downtown. We couldn't agree more, and in its haste to get the project started the city is trying to establish a link between Kapolei and Pearl City first because it is the path of least resistance. The only problem: That's not where the biggest traffic snarls are, so even if it's built that segment will not attract a lot of ridership.
- The City and County of Honolulu has revised its job-creation forecast for the project from 17,000 to 10,166. Even that would be a significant number. The only problem: The new number is "pure fiction."
- The City and County of Honolulu conducted a "fake groundbreaking" earlier this year, with work limited to relocation of utilities unless the city wants to risk losing any chance of federal funding. Congress hasn't approved funding for the project, and with all eyes focused on the November deadline facing the debt "super committee," we certainly don't think congressional support is a guarantee at this point.

The arguments outlined by Cayetano, Heen, Slater and Roth in their essay are compelling, and their reputations beyond reproach. With so much at stake, we hope that Hawaii's business leadership makes sure its voice — regardless of stance — is heard. City Council members need the feedback, especially when so much about the project is changing.

In opposing plans for the elevated rail system as they now stand, we are not faulting the Honolulu Authority for Rapid Transportation, the semi-autonomous body created to oversee the project. But we would remind its members that the "R" in HART stands for "Rapid," not "Rail." We encourage them to seek better alternatives to the current plan, which by every indication is leading us down the wrong track.

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