

TOP 12 REASONS WHY THE MAYOR'S STAFF SHOULD DO THEIR HOMEWORK

Of late the Mayor has been handing out a 4-page document titled, "TOP 12 REASONS FOR RAIL TRANSIT." We renamed it, "TOP 12 REASONS WHY THE MAYOR'S STAFF SHOULD DO THEIR HOMEWORK." It's embarrassingly inaccurate.

Reason # 1

The Mayor tells us that we had 814,423 registered vehicles on Oahu last July up 36 percent since 1992. WRONG, there were 688,163 vehicles on Oahu last July, up only 12.5 percent.¹

In addition, he says, "our Motor Vehicle Registration staff estimates there are another 168,000 unregistered vehicles on Oahu." Then the amount of unregistered vehicles seemed high to me and so I spent an hour chasing folks around the Motor Vehicles Department and no one knew anything about such an estimate. In fact they flat out denied that the Department had ever made such an estimate.

Then the Mayor writes about a "rail system carrying 10,000 an hour equals the carrying capacity of a six or eight lane highway."

The fact is that a single lane of freeway has a three times greater capacity than is carried, in practice, by the nation's busiest rail line, New York's 8th Avenue subway. Here's why: A single lane dedicated to buses has the capacity to carry 1,500 buses an hour with 75 passengers each or 112,000 people peak direction per hour. But that is just theoretical capacity, and is as meaningless as those statements rail proponents make discussing rail capacity.

The fact is that, in practice, neither a rail line, nor HOT lanes, could possibly use all the capacity available to it. And, in practice, HOV lanes generally carry far more riders per hour than do rail lines of any kind. Only New York's 6th Avenue subway carries more than the busiest HOV's.

Example, Portland's Eastside MAX light rail line carries 1,980 passengers per hour in the peak direction whereas Portland's 6th Avenue HOV lane carries 8,500 passengers per hour in buses according to federal government data.²

Reason # 2

This is just fluff that assumes everyone is going to save all kinds of travel time.

Reason # 3

This is about future real estate development along the rail line:

"Transit-friendly 'smart growth' would attract business, residential development, shops, and leisure centers around the stations in a pleasing and orderly fashion so that the need for automobile (sic) can be substantially reduced or eliminated."

However, the #1 study about BART's effect on real estate development, UC Berkeley's [Middle Age Sprawl: BART and Urban Development](#)³ says,

¹ State of Hawaii Data Book 2004, Table 18.08. Available from DBEDT staff.

² <http://www.honolulutraffic.com/passperhour.htm>.

³ [Landis, John & Robert Cervero. Middle Age Sprawl: BART and Urban Development. Access No. 14. University of California Transportation Center. Spring 1999. pp. 2-15. See also Rail Stations No Ticket to Success. Wall Street Journal. May 3, 2005. p. B4.](#)

“Just about everyone agrees that developing housing near BART stations is a good idea. In practice, it has always been a tough sell. Until recently, Bay Area apartment developers were more interested in suburban properties than older urban neighborhoods.

Local general plans and development policies were — and to some extent, still are — indifferent to multi-family housing development. In addition, residents of established single-family neighborhoods around BART stations like North Berkeley and Rockridge have long opposed residential densification of any form. Except at a few isolated stations like Fremont, Pleasant Hill, and now Fruitvale and Castro Valley, opportunities for large-scale residential development have been sparse.

Thus, notwithstanding thirty years of demolition and construction, most near-BART housing is what it was and where it was two decades ago. In 1990, apartments comprised about three-quarters of the housing stock at BART station areas, about the same as in 1970.”

After detailing what the expectations had been for BART and its impact on urban development, the authors then found,

“As the foregoing suggests, one would expect population and employment growth to favor sites served by BART. To what extent has this actually been so?

Contrary to expectations, we found that population has grown faster away from BART than near it. The Metropolitan Transportation Commission divides the nine-county San Francisco Bay Area into 34 transportation planning superdistricts. In the twenty years since BART opened, population grew 35.2 percent in the 25 superdistricts not served by BART and only 17.1 percent in the nine BART-served superdistricts.”

As we have said elsewhere, if the actual results of BART’s ridership, financial losses, effects on traffic congestion, and impacts on urban development had been forecast, BART would never have been built.

This fourteen page summary of the full BART study is worth the effort. It is enough to give pause to all but the most gullible that development possibilities for a rail transit line are even probable, let alone a given.

Reason # 4

This reason is the inevitable one about the provision of jobs.

The issue here is that no thought is given to the utility of the rail project. If it has, as we posit, little or no utility relative to cost, then such a project is the equivalent of digging a very large hole in the ground, lining it with concrete and filling it back up. At the end it will have provided many jobs for “working families” but taxpayers are left with the headache of morning after debt. In fact, the filled hole has a major advantage over a rail transit line in that there would be no annual \$56 million operating losses for taxpayers to cover.

On the other hand the HOT lanes option would provide more jobs than rail transit and would not result in extra taxes on the workers’ families.

Reason # 5

That rail would reduce traffic congestion. There is no urban area where this has occurred and so why should we expect it to in Honolulu?

The decennial U.S. Census shows that there is a continuing decline in the percentage of commuters using public transportation in virtually all U.S. cities — regardless of whether they have rail transit or not; public transportation commuting has declined from 12 percent in 1960 to 4.7 percent in 2000. In Honolulu the trend is the same.

All U.S. Census Data for journey-to-work, 1960-2000					
Percent of Workers by Mode	1960	1970	1980	1990	2000
Private Vehicle	64.0	77.7	84.1	86.5	87.9
Public transportation	12.1	8.9	6.4	5.3	4.7
Walked	9.9	7.4	5.6	3.9	2.9
Other means	6.8	2.5	1.6	1.3	1.2
Worked at home	7.2	3.5	2.3	3.0	3.3

Just in the last ten years the 2000 Census data shows that the nation had 13 million more drivers than in 1990, and 2 thousand fewer commuters using public transportation.⁴

Secondly, even if the nation's metro areas were able to halt this slide and maintain the same percentage of public transportation use, the growth in population and thus people driving to work would still totally overwhelm public transportation.

Let's put this in Honolulu terms: Here 8 percent of our commuters used TheBus in 2000 and 70 percent drove their cars. Each future 10,000 increase in commuters will result in 800, or 8 percent, more bus or rail commuters and 7,000, or 70 percent, more drivers — and that is only if transit usage does not continue to decline.

Here's some examples for individual metro areas for the past ten years: Washington DC had 35 thousand fewer commuters using public transportation in 2000 than in 1990, but had 317,000 more drivers; Portland: 22,000 more transit users and 173,000 more drivers. Denver: 17,000 more transit users and 248,000 more drivers.

It will be helpful to review the Census journey-to-work data for the top 50 metro areas.⁵

Reason # 6

The Mayor says that we would miss out on federal funding.

Instead of focusing on federal funding, we should instead focus on the local funding needed. That is, after all, what our children will have to pay back. The rail option is limited to \$500 million in federal New Starts funding⁶ as FTA explained to OMPO last year. The HOT lanes option has the same limit.⁷

The rail line was originally priced at \$2.64 billion from Kapolei to Iwilei, which, less the \$500 million, would require local funding of \$2.14 billion, plus annual operating losses of \$56 million (if the line is extended to UH as the Mayor testified last week then that will need another \$1.0 to \$1.5 billion locally, plus additional operating losses).

On other hand, the HOT lanes would cost \$1.0 billion, be eligible for the \$500 million funding, and we would, in addition, be able to sell the future stream of tolls for \$200 million. That would leave \$300 million needed in local funding.

Bear in mind the additional expense of the rail line is not going to result in many jobs or purchases in Hawaii. Most of the rail funding will go out of town for rails, trains, ticketing

⁴ <http://www.honolulutraffic.com/JTW9000B.pdf>

⁵ <http://www.honolulutraffic.com/JTWpercents.htm>

⁶ <http://oahumpo.org/PC/pc2004/pc04mm0323.html>

⁷ Pers. Comm. FTA. 5/13/2005.

equipment, elevators, escalators, computers, etc. The HOT lanes project is mostly concrete and labor and would be spent all locally.

Reason # 7

The Mayor says that visitors would help pay for the rail through the GE tax surcharge.

The Mayor is not taking into account that the more we charge visitors the fewer will come here. A half percent increase in the GE tax would lead to a one percent increase in overall prices because of the pyramiding effect.

If the vacation price elasticity was -4.0, a not unusual number, it would mean a 0.4 percent decline in visitors for each one percent increase in price. In this case, that would mean a decline of \$32 million in visitor spending on Oahu assuming that two-thirds of visitor spending is done on Oahu. We should include the impact of such a loss of business in the calculations.

Reason # 8

For this one the Mayor is saying that we must have rail because "many great cities have transit."

As if we are Paris, London, New York, Boston or Tokyo? Sir Peter Hall, author of *Cities of Tomorrow* and *Cities and Civilization* and a world authority on the development of great cities, tells us that great cities were, and are, "economic leaders, cities at the heart of vast trading empires, places in frenzied transition, magnets for talented people seeking fame and fortune. Outsiders made these places what they were: Athens's version of green-card holders, the noncitizen Metics; the Jews in 1900 Vienna; foreign artists in Paris around the same time."⁸ Ah, don't we wish; or do we?

Nothing shows the difference between the subways in real "great cities" and rail lines in, say, Portland. The great city subways have trains coming by every couple of minutes with carriages bulging with people. In Portland you wait at a lonely rail station looking for miles down the track and nothing is in sight. The rail tracks are as wide as a three lane highway and nothing is there. All it needs is a little tumbleweed to complete the picture. After ten minutes a train comes. In the intervening ten minutes, were it a reversible highway, it could have accommodated 400 automobiles, buses or vanpools. What a waste.

Reason # 9

The Mayor says, "We can learn from the experience of other cities."

That is highly unlikely since transportation officials and their consultants have assiduously avoided direct comparisons with other metro area in the past not only in Honolulu but across the nation. Alternatives Analyses and Environmental Impact Statements never look at the experiences of others. The reason is that when the hard data from other metro areas shows highly unfavorable outcomes. The main learning experience to be obtained from reviewing other cities is that you should not build rail lines.

The following table shows all the metro areas with rail sorted according to greatest increases in traffic congestion ("Change in hours lost") 1982-2002, together with their ranking. The last column shows the Increase/(Decrease) in the percentage of commuters using public transportation. Thus, for example, Honolulu in 1980 had 10 percent of its commuters using public transportation and that dropped to 8.3 percent in 2000, a decline of (17.0) percent.

⁸ <http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/7528904/site/newsweek/>

Area Size	Heavy rail?	Light rail?	Area	Hours Lost 2002	Hours Lost 1982	Change in hours Lost	Worst Ranking	Inc. (Dec.) Transit Use
Very Large		LRT	Dallas	61	13	-48	1	(47.1)
Large	HRT		Atlanta	60	14	-46	3	(47.1)
Very Large	HRT	LRT	Los Angeles	93	47	-46	3	(7.8)
Very Large	HRT	LRT	Washington, DC	67	21	-46	3	(24.8)
Very Large	HRT	LRT	San Francisco	73	30	-43	6	(15.2)
Very Large	HRT		Miami	52	11	-41	7	(20.4)
Very Large	HRT		Chicago	56	16	-40	8	(29.0)
Large		LRT	San Diego **	47	8	-39	9	3.0
Large		LRT	Minneapolis	42	3	-39	9	(46.4)
Large		LRT	Seattle	46	12	-34	16	(9.3)
Large		LRT	Portland	41	7	-34	16	(20.8)
Very Large	HRT	LRT	Boston	54	20	-34	16	(20.0)
Very Large	HRT	LRT	New York	50	18	-32	21	(5.0)
Large		LRT	Denver	45	16	-29	22	(25.9)
Medium		LRT	Salt Lake City	32	3	-29	22	(38.8)
Very Large	HRT	LRT	Philadelphia	40	14	-26	31	(29.8)
Large		LRT	Sacramento	36	12	-24	35	(20.6)
Large		LRT	St. Louis	36	14	-22	39	(57.1)
Large	HRT	LRT	Cleveland	11	1	-10	63	(55.3)
Large		LRT	Buffalo	10	3	-7	69	(47.0)
Large		LRT	Pittsburgh	12	10	-2	82	(40.4)
Sources: Congestion data from Texas Transportation Institute, Urban Mobility Study, Table 4.								
Inc/Decrease in Commuter use of public transportation from FHWA Journey to Work Trends, 1960-2000. Chapter 4, page 4-9.								
http://www.apta.com/links/transit_by_mode/heavyrail.cfm								
http://www.apta.com/links/transit_by_mode/lightrail.cfm								

Reason # 10

Self Reliance, he says. We are “vulnerable to ... vehicles that burn fossil fuels that are subject to the vagaries of world markets and producers beyond our control.” What on earth does our Mayor think generates the electricity that rail transit burns? Fairy dust?

Reason # 11

“Aloha,” he says. It will “markedly improve our quality of life.”

When most people think of improving their quality of life, riding public transportation does not immediately spring to mind. For that matter, neither does paying more taxes.

Reason #12

“There’s little room for more roads.” The fact is that reversible HOT lanes would not take up much more room than the rail transit line, so that is just not true.

Summary.

The Mayor has to have better input than this from his staff; these kinds of errors are quite embarrassing. Let’s hope he does better next time.