HONOLULU CIVIL BEAT

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The Last Word: Cliff Slater on Why Voters Should Reject Transit Authority

By Cliff Slater | 11/01/2010

One of the November 2nd ballot question reads:

"Shall the revised City Charter be amended to create a semi-autonomous public transit authority responsible for the planning, construction, operation, maintenance, and expansion of the City's fixed guideway mass transit system?"

The City tries to sell us on a Transit Authority with this:

"If established, a transit authority would have the ability to make decisions more quickly … would also provide for timely and efficient management of the planning, construction, operation, maintenance, and expansion of the rail transit system … and include the public in crucial issues … further enhancing transparency and accountability."

Kimberly Lee

In reality, what a Transit Authority will do is protect our elected councilmembers from accountability for the future rail calamities such as cost overruns and ridership shortfalls. And when the voters go ballistic over the additional traffic congestion caused by rail's construction, their ire will have to be directed at the semi-autonomous, semi-anonymous Transit Authority since elected officials will not be found anywhere near it.

What are the supposed benefits of a Transit Authority? The only real necessity to create a Transit Authority is when there are adjoining cities or counties which wish to merge their various transit operations into one entity. Our authority is not even going to merge rail and bus operations. Since the City promised that there will be a common transit pass for both rail and bus, one wonders how they will allocate the revenues.

The City tells us that the Authority can "make decisions more quickly." By that they really mean that the Authority will be authorized to bypass many of the safeguards in place to prevent overly quick decisions on eminent domain, bond issues, and large expenditures.

A Transit Authority for "enhancing transparency and accountability?" Now we know they are kidding. In reality, the Transit Authority is to shield elected officials from being accountable. At least with the Council we can listen in to their actions on 'Olelo. When did you last know about the goings on at the semi-autonomous, semi-anonymous City Board of Water Supply? We would love to listen in to hear how they justify allowing every precious drop of rain water to go downstream to the ocean through concrete culverts carefully designed to ensure that this pure mountain water never contaminates our aquifer — and then they beg us to use less water?

The City tells us that the Authority will provide, "efficient management of the … maintenance … of the rail system." Let's look what has happened with maintenance at other authorities.

Last year the Federal Transit Administration released a study that had been requested by a number of U.S. Senators whose states contain the nation's seven largest rail transit systems. Together, these seven authorities "serve more than 80 percent of all rail transit riders."

In the aggregate, the study found that to bring these systems up to a State of Good Repair (SGR) will cost the nation's taxpayers slightly more than $50 billion. FTA's definition of State of Good Repair means only halfway between "marginal" and "adequate." To be fully "adequate," "good," let alone "excellent" would take much greater funding. This is misleading; FTA should have called the program a State of Marginal Repair.

Note that it was "Authorities" that were responsible for the existing seven rail lines being $50 billion behind in maintenance.

And if you think that our councilmembers would not be shielded from blame, do an internet search for newspaper coverage on these problem authorities. Note that it is the authorities that are being blamed, not the elected officials. This is why elected officials want a "Transit Authority." When there are unexpected hits on the City Budget, it will be the semi officials in the semi-anonymous "Transit Authority" that will take the heat.

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It is the known elected officials we see on 'Olelo that need to be held accountable for the misfortunes that will overtake rail, not an appointed board of unknown, unelected, group of the usual suspects.

Require our elected Councilmembers to be accountable; vote NO on November 2.

Sources:

- FTA Study
- Council Resolution
- Honolulu Rail Transit Update email. City and County of Honolulu. October 8, 2010
- The seven agencies are Chicago, Massachusetts, (New York) Metropolitan Transit Authority, New Jersey, San Francisco, Southeastern Pennsylvania and Washington. Note that they are all either an "Authority," or in the case of San Francisco's BART "District" and New Jersey's Transit "Corporation," they are the same type of semi-autonomous public organizations as the "Authorities."

DISCUSSION: *Share your thoughts about the transit authority and read what others have to say about it in our* rail discussion.

Cliff Slater is a leader of the group HonoluluTraffic.com.

Have feedback? Suggestions? Email Us!