

[Civil Beat Editorial](#)

It's Not Too Late To Build Rail Better

Let's consider stopping at Middle Street and connecting the train to better transportation modes.

By [Civil Beat Editorial Board](#) / 12/5/2017



Need to catch TheBus? Middle Street is the place so let's talk about ending it there.

Honolulu's prophets of doom for the rail project — Randall Roth, Cliff Slater and Panos Prevedouros — believe they were right all along that the city's ambitious mass-transit plan is a mess.

Rail is years behind schedule and double its original price tag, yet it's only roughly halfway built. Imagine how much worse things might get once the elevated guideway construction moves into the heavily populated urban core.

Roth, Slater and Prevedouros have imagined exactly that. And that is why they've accepted the reality that rail is "happening," as Prevedouros put it in a recent editorial board meeting with Civil Beat. It comes in the wake of the Hawaii Legislature approving a \$2.4 billion funding package to continue building the rail line, now pegged at \$8.17 billion.

What Roth and Co. are *not* accepting, however, is that the city and the [Honolulu Authority for Rapid Transportation](#) should go ahead and build all of the planned 20 miles and 21 stations. Instead, they want rail to stop at Middle Street.

That is something we support talking about, and we hope the people of Honolulu and their leaders will take up the call.

Yes, the Middle Street proposal was [broadly met with derision](#) when Mayor Kirk Caldwell and then City Council Chair Ernie Martin reluctantly admitted [in June 2016](#) that a \$1.5 billion shortfall meant the train could not go the additional 4.1 miles to Ala Moana Center. Why would anyone want to take a train from East Kapolei to a street that has little to offer other than Love's Bakery?

But what Roth, Slater and Prevedouros argue now is that, because Middle Street is home to Oahu Transit Services — home of TheBus, The Handi-Van and the Kalihi-Palama Bus — it can be the future of what they envision [as a multimodal hub](#).

Rail is far from a done deal, and so we have time to continue discussing this monumental matter.

What's central to this thesis is that transportation technologies and business models are developing faster than once thought possible. Ride-hailing companies like Uber and Lyft have altered the way consumers view short trips, while automated buses and cars are already being tested and deployed.

Given the speed that autonomous vehicles are being developed, Honolulu's rail project may be competing with convenient, affordable technologies by the time it is built to Ala Moana. We don't have a crystal ball, but it's worth looking farther down the line and trying to build for the future rather than digging Honolulu into an outdated, overpriced hole.

In recognition of market conditions, late last month [the state announced](#) that Uber and Lyft will be allowed to pick up passengers at Daniel K. Inouye International Airport as part of a pilot project.

Older transit modes are also changing commuter habits. To the surprise of many, the [Biki bike-sharing system](#) has proven [enormously popular](#) during its first six months of operation, taking at least some drivers off the road.

Rail is far from a done deal, and so we have time to continue discussing this monumental matter.

The Never-Ending Story

The earliest the Middle Street station is expected to open is 2021, while HART's recovery plan to the [Federal Transit Administration](#) says a rail car is not expected to operate until 2023.

The rail is scheduled to be in full operation by December 2025, which seems highly optimistic.

We've also [learned recently](#) that HART is actually considering extending the line to the University of Hawaii Manoa and Waikiki. The cost of buying more real estate for the train and its stations has many residents wondering if this taxpayer-paid train wreck will ever end.

Roth and Co. believe the FTA would be open to a new plan. The built guideway could eventually be modified to accommodate shared or automatic transportation systems.

To use a popular cultural analogy, the future will be more like “The Jetsons” than the Orient Express. We are being asked to make a paradigm shift in the way we conceptualize public transportation. Let’s take the time to do it right.

In the meantime, the [Hawaii State Auditor](#) can conduct [its wide-ranging audit](#) of the rail project and HART.

What the auditors uncover about procedures related to design and construction and payments made to contractors and subcontractors could prove instructive.

The auditor is also asked to identify alternative routes and options, along with cost estimates. Middle Street should be part of that assessment.

[About the Authors](#)

[Civil Beat Editorial Board](#)

The members of Civil Beat’s editorial board are Pierre Omidyar, Patti Epler, Jim Simon, Richard Wiens, Chad Blair, Jessica Terrell and Landess Kearns. Opinions expressed by the editorial board reflect the group’s consensus view. Chad Blair, the Politics and Opinion Editor, can be reached at cblair@civilbeat.org.