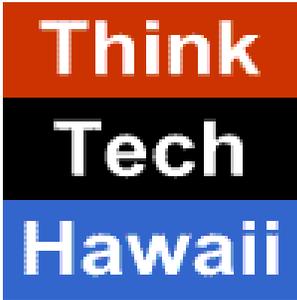


The traffic honeymoon doesn't last forever

December 7th, 2010

By Jay Fidell



Our new mayor is, of course, still on his honeymoon, and he's entitled to that. But given the traffic congestion we still have, the honeymoon can't last forever. We can and should expect him to do something about it, and soon.

So far there's no sign of any improvement and no word on what he will do about it. We have some of the worst congestion in the country, with thanks to Mufi Hannemann, who thought he could make us believe that rail would solve it all. That wasn't and isn't true.

Like his predecessor, our new mayor has taken the front page about rail, without giving us any assurance he will also fix the traffic. If only we could hear less about rail and more about fixing the traffic, how happy and encouraged we would be.

The honeymoon isn't over, but so far the imbalance and the traffic continue unabated.

PATIENCE IS NOT PRUDENCE

We need modern solutions - timed lights, sensor intersections, overpasses, underpasses, HOT lanes. We're desperate for these things. The technology is there, but we ignored it during the Hannemann years. Surely, we learned something and have higher expectations now.

Multiple solutions are as out there, low-hanging fruit, easy for the taking. What about the low-tech, the walk ways, bike lanes and roller skating paths? We have the climate and terrain. We went to the moon 40 years ago, certainly we can do this. It was never rocket science.

The fix is actually easy. The hard part is keeping city government focused.

Honolulu, the zen city, where everyone waits patiently impacted in traffic. We must be the most patient people on the planet. Nobody even blows his horn. We all just sit there waiting for the mayor to do something, thinking and hoping that he must care enough to do something.

Municipalities are supposed to do three basic things – police, fire and infrastructure. Managing roadways and traffic is definitely infrastructure, but as with the sewers and roadways we seem to forget that while we sit fiddling with the music dial our economy is burning.

It's a social compact - the city and the mayor take our tax money, and we expect them to provide us with police, fire and infrastructure, including traffic management. If they don't, they aren't doing their job and we have to hold them accountable.

Right now, I'd have to say they're not. Take a drive and soon enough you'll be caught in a jam.

NATURAL ORDER OF THINGS

We sit there because we think that congestion must be in the natural order of things - that this is the way it's supposed to be and there's no point in fighting Mother Nature or City Hall. But this is not the way it's supposed to be. We can do much better – this is the 21st century.

It's completely doable. There are experts and consultants all over the world that can help us, equipment suppliers from hither and yon that can provide the technology that will get us where we need to go without the daily struggle of being locked in traffic for hours at a time.

Multiply those hours, your hours in traffic, by what you could earn or do for each of those hours, and then multiply that by all the people in all the thousands of cars you see lined up around you, and you will understand how this forced inactivity affects our QOL and our state's economy.

And while you sit there, you can't do anything, not even make a legal call.

A modern city changes to meet new demands, especially in roadways and traffic- a modern city regularly widens old roads, builds alternative new ones, improves intersections, creates traffic circles and a host of other improvements that move the traffic. We don't. We're locked in a kind of infrastructure paralysis, neither seeking nor finding any progress.

If our new mayor was looking for excellence he would bring in Panos, the most knowledgeable traffic engineer in the state, to do modern traffic management. But for political considerations that's not likely, so Panos will have to wait and take his chances again two years from now.

Along the way, a year from now, we'll have APEC, with heads of state here from all over the world. To the last head of state and governmental official, they'll be stuck in traffic every day they're here, and they'll all know the meaning of our pain and our red-faced embarrassment.

They'll remember us as the congestion center of the Pacific for years to come.

THE GAUNTLET IS DOWN

As the honeymoon comes to an end, we should be seeing some improvement. We should be seeing high tech timers, sensors and signal boxes being installed everywhere. We should be seeing major construction work going on to improve and rationalize our intersections.

When I think of the waste of human resources by having thousands of people sit idle in impenetrable congestion for hours every day, it hurts me to think of the waste. It hurts me to think how much that time is worth. It hurts me to think that the City's doing nothing about it.

I'd like to think that somebody in city government is feeling the same pain, somebody in a control room somewhere dedicated to fixing the traffic. But I don't have that sense at all. I rather think they're working only on rail - and would say the traffic is our problem, not theirs.

The congestion in this city stands in the way of everything we want to do, and hurts our economy, our disposition and for that matter our way of life. You can't feel good if you're sitting in endless congestion. You can't be truly happy or at one with the universe if you're locked up in traffic. Even nostalgia can't help you.

In the old days, you could get from one place to another in Honolulu in minutes. No problem getting to work or going to Kaimuki for lunch. It gave us all a remarkable freedom, one which we lost some time ago. Now we grit our teeth and try to find solace in the creature comforts of our expensive cars, turning the other way on the gridlock around us.

The right thing to do is to sit up straight and make the city accountable. We are or should be frustrated as hell with the congestion in our city. Enough with the zen already.