

Future of Honolulu's Rail Project?

Dark cloud of growing public doubts cast shadow on Honolulu rail.

Editor's note: This guest editorial is speculation on what the future of Honolulu's \$5.3 billion steel on steel rail project could turn out to be. There has been no rail built yet. The city is issuing contracts and a lawsuit to stop the 20-mile project could still stop it in its tracks.



BY BOB FREEMAN - The long abandoned elevated rail system on O'ahu has found a new life and becomes literally the largest tourist attraction in the islands. Modeled after the long successful Hi-Line project in Manhattan, New York, It brings new life to an eyesore reminiscent of politics and financial planning run amok during previous City administrations.

The 20-mile stretch of graffiti-covered elevated concrete corridors, which has been a haven for drug dealers and vagrants, has finally been cleaned up. Tracks and other remnants of the failed system have been removed and sold as scrap to partially finance the project. Tons of copper wire and other electrical items had been stolen and sold for scrap by vandals and thieves long ago.

Beautiful plantings of exotic tropical flowers and trees line a path and bike-way stretching half way across the island of O'ahu. Five story high train stations, which have been turned into mini shopping malls along the way, provide starting and stopping points for those who are not ready to brave the full 20 miles. They also provide restroom facilities, maintained at the expense of concessionaires.

In 2008, then Mayor, Mufi Hannemann, with the support of construction unions, designers and engineers and others looking for a piece of what was then proposed as a four billion dollar pie, designed and supported the project against the objections of traffic engineers, economists and half of the O'ahu population.

The project, started over 30 years ago as a light rail “solution” to O’ahu's growing traffic problems, grew in scope and cost, and disrupted traffic on major thoroughfares for 17 years. The din of pile drivers operating 24 hours per day to provide supports for the concrete corridors rang in the ears and rattled the homes of residents. Money was extracted from the funding of the City's bus system, which was rated as one of the most successful in the country, to help support the rail project. After numerous delays, work stoppages and massive cost overruns, voters finally demanded, through referendum, that legislators “pull the plug”.

The projected project cost had escalated to over \$5 billion before ground was broken, and had reached over \$20 billion before the project was abandoned in 2028. Projected maintenance costs which were grossly underestimated, probably intentionally, were later recalculated to exceed paid fares by over 2000%! This income shortfall was to be recouped by raising the State gross excise tax (similar to sales tax in most states) from 4% to 15%.

Although concern was shown by Hawaiian groups before ground breaking in 2011 and discounted by rail supporters, iwi, or the bones of buried Hawaiian ancestors were discovered at many of the construction sites. Hawaiian culture is very protective of iwi, and feel that they should not be disturbed. Many of the rail stations were re-designed and relocated to avoid newly discovered ancient burial grounds. Others were delayed for years during the process of carefully disinterring the remains for relocation.

The Italian company, Ansaldo, contracted to build and maintain the rail cars, for just over \$5 million, filed for bankruptcy after receiving over \$1.5 billion, and delivering only 4 cars. Those cars, which never carried a single passenger, are now used as planters full of beautiful ferns and protea in front of some of the stations at Ala Moana, Downtown, Kalihi and Waipahu.

Few people today remember the efforts of a few groups and individuals who in 2010 attempted to “Stop The Rail” to save the people of Hawaii and their children from the projected long term financial burden of this project. It is expected that the last of the bonds will be paid off by 2060; 50 years after the beginning of the failed rail project. This makes this the world's most expensive flower garden.