editor's page

Trains Kill Buses

Twenty years of urban rail expansion in Los Angeles has done nothing to improve traffic and a lot to strangle bus service.

PHOTO: LINNY MORRIS

MUFI HANNEMANN MAY BE OUT as mayor of Honolulu, but plans for rail go on. The strongest contenders in this month's election support it, including acting Mayor Kirk Caldwell and city prosecutor Peter Carlisle. Only University of Hawai'i engineering professor Panos Prevedouros opposes rail, advocating high-occupancy expressways.

HONOLULU Magazine does not endorse candidates. For whom you vote, or whether you vote at all, is not our business. It's up to the candidates to convince you if rail or expressways are the way to go. But transportation is one of the city's most pressing issues, and what I can do for you this month is take you to Los Angeles.

Sorry, no, we're not going to Disneyland, though a monorail may be involved. This summer, the city of Los Angeles celebrated the 20th anniversary of its Metro Rail system, an $8-billion experiment in a car-crazy city of millions.

The result? Traffic is still congested and mass transit use has actually declined. "Rather than bolster ridership ... the emphasis on

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rail has come at the expense of the MTA's vast network of buses and may have cost the agency at least 1.5 billion passenger boardings from 1986 to 2006," wrote the *Los Angeles Times* on July 23, 2010.

Trains kill buses. Trains cost more than buses. Trains will never come to you where you are, unless you consent to live in the sort of dense, transit-oriented developments that politicians whip up in order to retroactively justify their trains.

Any regular reader of this column knows I've been a skeptic of rail in Honolulu for years. It strikes me as the most unimaginative, 19th-century use of $5 billion we could possibly find. Even buses seem fussily 20th century, rationed and limiting. True 21st-century technology is networked, decentralized, on-demand. Traffic is a
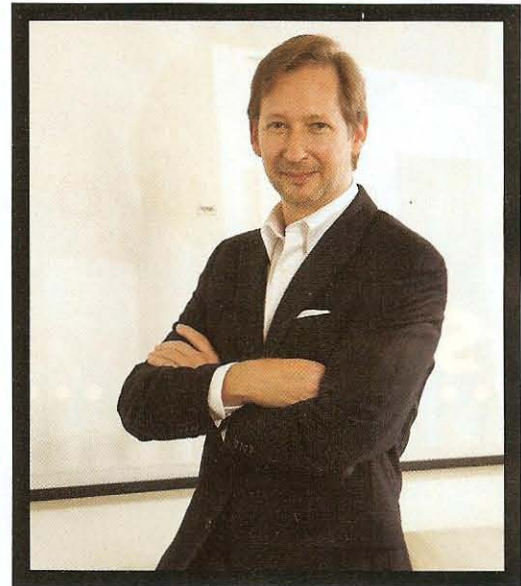
distribution problem, the sort of thing that can be more cheaply solved with better data than with miles of concrete.

Forget train tracks and bus lines. Imagine a network of on-demand shuttle buses. From your home or your phone, you send the network a request to go somewhere. The network knows where you are—after all, your phone already does, just ask it—so it examines other nearby requests, sorts by destinations, locates the nearest shuttle (also tracked through real-time GPS), and tells you when driver Bob Drivington will be swinging by to pick you up. You get door-to-door service in shared vehicles that only go where they need to go, and only when they need to go somewhere.

Assume that these are electric shuttle vans, not gasoline-powered. This transit network could be deployed on the roads we already have, and the size of the shuttle fleet is scalable, unlike the monumental concrete of elevated rail. Assume, too, the progressive notion of this being a city-subsidized mass-transit service for the young, the old, the broke.

This is not a bus line, or a taxi service, it's something else entirely. In my wildest fantasy, every car owner in Honolulu can join the network as drivers as long as they're willing to pick up and drop off their fellow citizens as they go about their own business. At the end of the month, the city would drop a little cash into their PayPal accounts for the valuable public service of decreasing other peoples' need for a car of their own.

I'd like to take you to a city where this happens, but it doesn't exist. Maybe Honolulu could lead the world by inventing this system. We could get advice from Walmart, whose real-time inventory tracking made it a global leader in efficiently moving stuff around. We could. Or we could all just sit around and wait for the train, hoping to somehow have better luck than Los Angeles.

A. KAM NAPIER
Editor