

September 25, 2010

Hannemann's Landslide Loss Calls For Re-evaluation of Honolulu's \$5.5 Billion Fixed-Rail Project and Openness

BY BEVERLY ANN DEEPE KEEVER - The landslide loss of Mayor Mufi Hannemann in the governor's race seems to signal public concern about his elevated fixed-rail project costing \$5.5 billion – amounting to about \$4,500 for every person in Hawaii – or else about his heavy-handed process that stifled citizen and expert discussion.

A close reading of official returns of the Sept. 18 primary election indicates that Hannemann lost all counties except Kauai, where he drew only six votes more than his opponent in the Democratic primary, but that his most profound loss was clearly in Honolulu. Hannemann lost the Democratic primary election on Sept. 18 by 51,699 votes statewide – and nearly three quarters of those lost votes (42,758) were cast against him in Honolulu, where voters more closely saw him operate and knew they would have to foot most of the costs for the fixed-rail project that he had been spin-doctoring on them.

The surprising magnitude of such a heavy loss at the ballot box calls for a critical re-evaluation of Hannemann's big project by city, state and federal officials and more openness and public participation.

Honolulu voters gave Hannemann 20,000 fewer votes in this primary election than they gave him in the low-turnout 2008 primary and a whopping 112,000 fewer votes than they gave him in the high-turnout 2008 general election.

Hannemann's spin-doctoring on rail began suddenly to hit Honolulu voters during the summer of 2010. Then, on top of the \$5.5 billion rail project, Honolulu voters learned on Aug. 10 that Hannemann had been forced to strap them with an additional \$5.9 billion for sewer improvements ordered by the federal executive and judicial branches and agreed to with non-governmental organizations that had brought the lawsuit – plus other long-range, multi-million-dollar obligations for wastewater treatment plants by 2024.

While some political pundits attribute the surprise of such a lopsided election-day loss of Hannemann to his ill-advised campaign brochures and other tactical blunders, the larger, more deep-seated and worrisome issues of financial and other costs of Hannemann's fixed-rail project—and higher sewer fees – seem more persuasive in explaining why voters cast their ballots so overwhelmingly against him.

Although traditional Democratic voters went for Neil Abercrombie statewide, that explanation begs the question of why this is so when Hannemann had the endorsements of all the big public and private-sector labor unions, which anchor Democratic Party support in Hawaii, plus big-donor contributions, and when he looked more like the populations on the Neighbor Islands, an ethnic qualification he himself had introduced early in the campaign.

Hannemann's biggest margin of loss percentage-wise of 25.4 percent came in Honolulu (35.8 percent vs. Abercrombie's 61.2 percent), compared to the 21.3 percent margin of loss on the Big Island (38.3 to Abercrombie's 59.6), Maui's 7.8 percentage loss (44.5 to Abercrombie's 52.3) Kauai (47.9 to Abercrombie's 47.8 percent – a 6-vote difference). Statewide Hannemann lost 37.7 to Abercrombie's 59.3—a difference of 21.6 percent.

This stunning lopsided landslide illuminating voter concern and caution on Hannemann's multi-billion-dollar fixed-rail project should cause Hawaii's decision-makers at the state, local and federal levels to carefully reconsider all costs and benefits of this project.

Honolulu voters approved the vague outlines of Hannemann's rail project in the 2008 general election by a narrow margin of only 50.6 percent of the total votes cast – and only 15,233 more yes votes than no votes. But this vote was made before the full onslaught of the U.S. government's bailouts of the big banks and financial companies, rising unemployment locally and nationally and a tally for Honolulu of the total cost of the Iraq and Afghanistan wars since 2001 of \$964 million, as of Sept. 24, 2010 (to see the cost of war increase second by second for Hawaii or for individual counties in the state, visit www.costofwar.com).

Hannemann's elevated, fixed-rail project would not necessarily create many jobs for local workers and revenue for Hawaii companies. How many businesses in Hawaii manufacture or even sell high-speed trains or steel rails? "Transportation projects in Hawaii have been all about jobs and the connections between money, land, and power," writes Karl Kim, an M.I.T.-educated professor in the Department of Urban and Regional Planning at the University of Hawaii at Manoa. "There hasn't been sufficient scrutiny over who would be employed by these expensive capital projects and the extent to which mainland firms and outside labor will be imported to complete them. It's been about winning or losing battles, rather than designing and building effective solutions for meeting the real transportation needs of communities."

The guarantee of local jobs was further clouded just a week after the election by the announcement made on Sept. 24 that U.S. regulations governing some construction projects involving federal funds would override state requirements that Hawaii residents to be hired.

"How is it," Kim goes on to ask "that we can be furloughing teachers, cutting welfare benefits, and downsizing vital community programs while still spending billions on fixed rail transit, financed largely by a regressive excise tax?"

Kim maintains that official “reviews of major transportation projects have displayed insufficient systems thinking and an alarming disregard for the public.” He says that officials have insufficiently considered mixed modes of travel, “in which walking, biking or driving and travel by bus and rail are part of an overall system of ground transportation. We need to examine public and private options, including taxi and shuttle services.”

“Rail transit, unfortunately, is headed down the same track as H-3 and the Superferry,” Kim explains. “We can expect lawsuits, challenges, delays, and wasted time and energy because not enough attention was paid to the assessment and disclosure of significant impacts.” The Hawaii Supreme Court in the Superferry case mandated alternatives analysis and assessments of environmental, cultural, and socioeconomic impacts.

In a recent, remarkable book titled *Value of Hawaii: Know the Past, Shaping the Future*, Kim warns, “Transparency and broad public participation are essential.”

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