

Why a Single Rail Line with 12-15 Stations Is Bad Transportation Policy for Oahu *

The Honolulu High-Capacity Transit Corridor Project is studying how to improve the ability of people to move in the congested E-W corridor between Kapolei and UH. The problem is traffic congestion during extended peak periods. The ability to move can be satisfied with thousands of empty seats moving on a rail line every day. This is fake mobility, not a solution! It is an avoidance of the problem that the community needs solved.

The City's site also says that over 60% of Oahu's population lives within the proposed rail corridor. Perhaps 60% do live to the left and the right of a single rail line, in valleys and ridges. On the average, these residents have to walk about two miles on heels, dress shoes or flip-flops in order to "improve their ability to move." In reality, much less than 5% of Oahu's population is within one half mile of rail stations and can somewhat conveniently use the rail line.

We are bogged down by severe congestion because we implement too few real traffic solutions and because Honolulu is by far the most lane deficient metropolitan area in the U.S. It has 1.5 lanes per 1,000 people whereas San Juan, Puerto Rico has 2.2 lanes per 1,000 people (U.S. Census.) Most U.S. cities have over 3 lanes per 1,000 people. We do too little to improve our transportation infrastructure while the economy, tourism, activities and traffic grow, as they should in a vital city.

We are now spending \$10 million and three years to study the politician's *du jour* transportation "vision." The focus is on elevated rail. Rail as a transportation means is literally a bankrupt 19th century mode that has little or no place in modern cities which did not develop around legacy rail systems. No private investor would ever fund rail transit because all systems are tremendous money losers.

In contrast, most highways in Europe, Asia and Latin America are toll roads, collecting user fees (not heavy regressive taxes) and are profitable. They pay for themselves, provide subsidies to express bus service, and returns to investors or funds for public coffers. They are certifiably win-win developments. In fact, in most cases, governments protect their right to build highways and collect tolls. All toll highways in the U.S. and internationally are greatly appreciated and heavily used.

Normal daily life for most adults is a chain of events and trips, the vast majority of which occur outside a narrow rail "corridor." Rail corridor is misnomer to begin with. Honolulu will only have 12 to 15 individual access points (stations) between Kapolei and the UH. For a comparison on accessibility and mobility, the H-1 freeway has 12 interchanges between the UH and Mapunapuna.

Will the average Honolulu commuter walk two miles to the station, and then do the same after work? Perhaps the answer is park and ride: Where is the space and budgets for large, multi-story parking structures? Who will park in desolate park and ride spots? (These facilities will become thief magnets.) Too few, like the very few who did in the failed express bus park and ride depot in Hawaii Kai.

Perhaps people will use buses to and from rail stations. So a typical commute would be: walk from home to the nearest bus stop, wait for the bus, ride the bus, exit at the rail station, up the escalator, wait to pay, go through the turn styles, wait for train, travel to your destination at 25 miles per hour or less (expect to stand for 20+ minutes during crush times and be exposed to some chance for groping and pick-pocketing), rush to exit the station, wait for transfer bus, board bus to nearest stop, and walk to your final destination. By most accounts, this is a most unpleasant, hot (or wet,) and inconvenient commute.

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Rail transit needs stations that must meet the Americans with Disabilities Act in all respects. As a result, the stations will be huge elevated structures. The proposed rail system will also have major energy losses: It is a long linear system with frequent power-drawing start-and-acceleration cycles even when it is empty. An additional power plant will likely be needed. Recall that we have brown outs already.

People do not simply travel in order to clog the streets for each other. What we see out on the streets is by and large a mirror image of ourselves living normal lives, participating in a variety of activities and giving and receiving numerous services. These are the types of trips you see on the city's roads:

- Commutes (workers and students)
- Personal (errands, appointments, entertainment)
- Household (groceries, rides to children, elders)
- Cargo, freight and heavy goods
- Mail and package delivery
- Visitor travel to attractions
- Access to airport
- Access to port(s) and harbor(s)
- Service, repair and household deliveries
- Social services to people
- Emergency services and evacuations

Take a good look at this list. Even if a single rail line is heavily used, it will serve less than 5% of people's activities in a normal work day. Only severely uninformed decision makers would advocate spending \$2.5 to \$3.5 billion in local taxes to build a rail system on Oahu. Note that this amount does not include park-and-ride-lots, a new power plant and well over \$100 million in annual operating expenses.

Between 2000 and 2004 Honolulu had a rail transit "dream team" consisting of Mayor Harris, Chair of Council's Transportation Committee Bainum, and experienced transit executive Soon in the helm at the City's transportation department. The project was *Oahu Trans2K*. Fixed rail transit was analyzed in preliminary stages and was rejected. It was rejected in 2002 because it was an unaffordable option and because it wouldn't meet FTA passenger demand requirements. Instead *Trans2K* concluded with a Bus Rapid Transit plan. The regional BRT component of that plan was highly meritorious but it has not been retained in the current "alternatives analysis." A regional BRT would provide a similar service, serve a similar number of passengers, and cost less than one quarter of the cost of rail.

Contrary to popular commentary, developers are not pro-rail. They are pragmatists who simply need a sufficient transportation capacity next to their property for it to become desirable for development. However, by necessity, they become pro-rail if the politician *du jour* is pro-rail.

Careful research in Arizona, California, Michigan and elsewhere has established that the automobile is the best tool for getting people a job and out of poverty and welfare. Second best is a good bus system. Rail provides too few destinations and flexibility for job finding and retention. When placed on the ballot, and given true information about costs, communities soundly defeat rail proposals in favor of buses and roads.

Oahu needs traffic relief and tax relief. Rail transit is loaded with local taxes, and is a congestion preservative. Recall that soon enough everyone on Oahu will be burdened by a 12.5% increase in the general excise tax. **What we are getting is exactly the opposite of what we need: More congestion and more taxes!**
