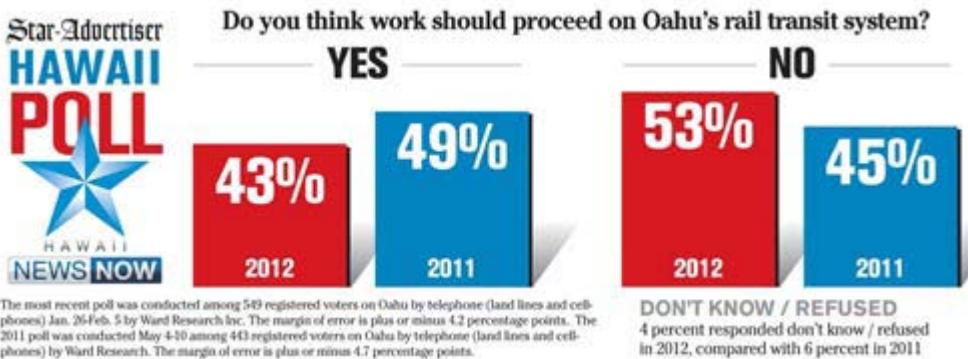




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Rail support falls

By Kevin Dayton / kdayton@staradvertiser.com, Feb 12, 2012



Support for Honolulu's planned rail system from East Kapolei to Ala Moana Center has sagged to less than a majority, with only 43 percent of Oahu voters now saying they believe work should continue on the project, according to a new Hawaii Poll.

Support for rail remains solid among residents who usually vote Democrat, but the rail project is now opposed by more than two-thirds of those who describe themselves as independents and two-thirds who usually vote Republican, according to the poll conducted by Ward Research Inc. for the Star-Advertiser and Hawaii News Now.

The poll shows support for the rail project has slipped as the city moves closer to heavy construction. An identical Hawaii Poll question posed to voters last May found 49 percent of Oahu voters wanted work to continue on the project.

Beverly A. Brunke, an 80-year-old hula and voice instructor, described the planned rail system as a "foolish toy." She predicts Oahu commuters won't ride the 20-mile, elevated rail line.

"They won't use the thing, they'll use their car, and they'll put that ugly monstrosity up in the air, making our island ugly," Brunke said. "I think it's an abomination."

"We don't have the money, and there are so many ways that are cheaper and quicker," such as adding freeway lanes, Brunke said. "It just doesn't make any sense. This is a politician's thing, and I don't understand it. I just don't understand it."

Brunke lives in Kaneohe, and the poll shows 60 percent of Windward Oahu, North Shore and urban Honolulu residents do not want to continue with the rail project.

By contrast, 53 percent of those who live in the H-1 and Ewa corridor from Waianae to Pearl City support the rail project.

The Honolulu Authority for Rapid Transportation says rail will offer commuters an inviting, fast and reliable alternative to driving. The city predicts the rail system will improve highway travel times by taking about 40,000 vehicles off Honolulu roads each weekday by 2030.

Another benefit of the project is job creation, with HART estimating that construction of the rail system will generate about 10,000 jobs.

The city last week authorized the first heavy construction on the \$5.27 billion rail project, which is scheduled to be completed in 2019. The city has spent more than \$342 million in local and federal funding on the project so far.

The Hawaii Poll shows most Filipino-American and Caucasian voters polled do not want to continue with the rail project, while support for rail is strongest among voters of Japanese ancestry and among residents who make more than \$100,000 a year.

Retiree Leo Putorak, 64, said he has supported some form of rail for more than three decades, and said the project would have been less expensive if the city had built it years ago.

"I think the expense is well worth it," said Putorak, who lives in Aiea. "We've spent money on other things that haven't nearly had as much of a payback as mass transit, so I think the finances should not stop us one bit."

He added, "It's a separate and distinct means of transportation, so it's not going to be affected by stalled vehicles or accidents or anything else that's happening on the roadways."

The Hawaii Poll was conducted among 771 registered voters statewide, including 549 Oahu voters. Only Oahu voters were asked about rail. The survey was done by telephone from Jan. 26 to Feb. 5. The margin of error for the rail question was plus or minus 4.2 percentage points.

Oahu voters supported rail by a larger margin in 2008, when a ballot question asked voters whether the city should have the authority to construct a steel-wheel-on-steel-rail transit system. Voters approved that ballot measure 52.6 percent to 47.4 percent.

Cliff Slater, a longtime opponent of the Honolulu rail project, said he believes support for the project is slipping because more Honolulu residents have come to understand that traffic congestion will increase even after the rail project is built.

Slater said that despite the cost and other problems with rail, he believes some people supported the project because they thought it would make their daily commute easier.

"We have felt that the message is getting out there that traffic congestion would be worse," he said.

Rail advocates acknowledge Honolulu's growing population will cause traffic congestion to worsen even after the rail project is completed, but say Oahu highways will become even more congested without rail.

Mayor Peter Carlisle said rail offers a green transportation solution that will help get cars off the road and reduce pollution.

He described the project as "a catalyst for a rejuvenated, a renovated and a renaissance approach to the urban core," adding, "It'll do all sorts of positive things in the future for education, for transportation, for affordable housing, for elder mobility — all of those things are going to be available."

Unfortunately, Carlisle said, it can be difficult to make the public aware of those benefits.

"I think the opposition has been very vocal," he said. "They've given a lot of information out, and in my opinion some of it is, unfortunately, misinformation."

The rail project has faced a series of challenges over the past two years, including a federal lawsuit filed last year by rail opponents such as former Democratic Hawaii Gov. Ben Cayetano, former state Democratic Party Chairman Walter Heen and University of Hawaii law school professor Randy Roth.

Those rail critics want the city to reconsider basic issues such as the route the city selected for the rail line to follow, and whether a monorail system or some other technology would work better for Honolulu than the steel-wheel-on-steel-rail system the city selected.

The lawsuit asks the federal court to halt construction of the rail system until a supplemental environmental impact statement is done to correct the alleged problems.

Supporters of the rail project were also confronted by a high-profile political challenge this year when Cayetano announced he is running for Honolulu mayor. Cayetano says that if he is elected, he intends to stop the rail project.

Star-Advertiser reporter B.J. Reyes contributed to this report.