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City needs to give more substance, not PR, to rail

By David Shapiro, Feb 15, 2012

With public support for Oahu rail sinking as the city tries desperately to accelerate its construction schedule, Mayor Peter Carlisle writes off the disconnect as a public relations problem.

"I think we haven't done as good a job as we should have in showing people exactly what all the accurate information is," Carlisle said in response to a Star-Advertiser poll that showed rail support dropping from 53 percent in a 2008 city referendum to only 43 percent today.

The poll finds Carlisle's re-election bid trailing the anti-rail campaign of former Gov. Ben Cayetano 35 percent to 44 percent, with former acting Mayor Kirk Caldwell picking up 16 percent.

Said Carlisle, "I think we need to stir up the pot a little bit and get people back to where they recognize how critical this is for the future, and if it requires change in the way we're essentially getting the information out, then we need to go through that change."

If the mayor can't see beyond the PR, he's missing the point.

The city has spent more than \$5 million on hard-sell PR for rail. In addition, the project has enjoyed the editorial support of Honolulu's daily newspapers and the cheerleading of well-heeled business and labor interests.

Rail opponents are scattered by contrast, with only a small fraction of the PR resources. That they're gaining the upper hand suggests Carlisle's problem goes far deeper than PR.

The reality is that the more rail takes shape, the more honest citizens are questioning its fundamental assumptions. The city is paying for glossing these over as it rushed to approval.

How much traffic relief can we expect from rail? It's sinking in that rail won't actually reduce traffic, but will only reduce future gridlock growth by an uncertain amount.

If that's all we'll get for \$5.27 billion, is rail really a better traffic solution than far cheaper bus and road improvements? That's exactly what the city's main rail consultant previously recommended for Honolulu.

How much will rail cost? Few believe the current budget will be enough, and the city hasn't put forth a credible Plan B to pay for overruns.

How much will rail's cost cut into our ability to pay for higher-priority improvements to our shabby road, sewer and water systems? The fear that there will be little left was reinforced when Carlisle diverted to rail a \$450 million city line of credit originally intended for water and sewers.

How much will the elevated train from Kapolei to Ala Moana scar Oahu's beauty? Opposition by environmental groups that would normally favor public transportation set off alarms.

It adds up to fertile ground for Cayetano's call to get out while we can, and Carlisle's answer needs convincing substance more than PR.