



The Case for Stopping Rail Dead in its Tracks

By Cliff Slater

The rail project began as a \$2.7 billion 34-mile line from Kapolei proper to UH Manoa. Then it became a \$5.3 billion 20-mile line from East Kapolei to Ala Moana Center. Now it looks likely to cost \$7 billion — or more — just to get the 15 miles to Middle Street.

Let's think this through before we go any further.

We would have about \$3.5 billion in it now if we stopped it cold around Pearl Ridge, settled the outstanding contracts, sold the trains, and sold off the rails that have been rusting this past six years. That money is what is called “sunk” costs; it has been spent and there's nothing we can do about it.

Projected costs in billion\$	
Stop now	\$3.5
to Middle Street	\$3.2
to Ala Moana Center	\$3.3
Total	\$10.0

The next decision is whether it is worth spending \$3.2 billion more to get the train to Middle Street? Or \$6.5 billion more to get to Ala Moana Center?

Now that we have lost our naïveté about the City's rail cost projections, perhaps it is time for us to lose our naïveté about their forecasts for ridership and traffic congestion.

Ridership: The City is forecasting an increase in ridership greater than the growth of population. For the last thirty years our bus ridership has declined despite a 200,000 increase in population. Yet the City has absurdly forecast that in the future, ridership will grow with population — even if we don't build rail. The dirty secret nationally about transit ridership of all kinds is that transit's share of commuting relative to population is declining and has been for decades.

Traffic congestion: The City and the feds agree that, “traffic congestion will be worse with rail in the future than it is today,” even if they build it to Ala Moana Center.

The problem is population increase. For each increase in population one-tenth will commute by rail and/or bus. Another tenth will walk, cycle, or telecommute. The vast majority will use their cars. In short, for every ten new commuters, one will commute by transit, eight will commute by car. If ever there was a guaranteed program for failure, it is thinking that rail and/or bus will help with congestion.

So, here's a question: If you voted to spend \$5.3 billion for rail in 2008, would you have voted for it had you known what you know today? If you would not, then why would you want to spend \$6.5 billion to finish it?

So back to our problem: Is it worth spending \$3.2 billion to get rail to Middle Street. Is this the best option we have for \$3.2 billion? That is \$3,400 in construction costs for every man, woman, and child, or \$13,600 for a family of four, whether you ride it or not. And double

that to get to Ala Moana Center. Add to the annual operating losses of \$700 for each family of four. For what?

Better we should ask Dr. Panos Prevedouros what he would do if he had \$6.5 billion to improve traffic congestion. We could start with all the highway improvements Governor Ige just cancelled.

Rail will do nothing for ridership or traffic congestion. All it will do is get most, but not all, public transportation users to their work a little faster than they did before. So while it will provide a slight benefit to about four percent of commuters, it will do nothing for the other 96 percent.

If the City had been honest about costs and effects on traffic congestion, we would not have built it in the first place. The sensible thing to do now is to just stop the madness. Let it stay in place; it will make an excellent recreational facility for biking and walking and remind us voters to be a little more skeptical the next time politicians come courting us with their “visions.”

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