

RAIL: A VISION FOR TOMORROW

The battle for a rail transit system for Oahu is heating up. Both opponents and proponents have formed organizations to further their cause. I have ridden many rail systems around the world, and I am a strong believer that we need to build a system for Oahu.

In the next 30 – 40 years, Oahu's population is expected to increase by at least 250,000 people, maybe more. It is likely many if not the majority will live in Central and West Oahu. We have the land to build homes, schools, parks, and businesses, however, we do not have enough land to build more highways. Some individuals are pushing for an elevated toll road from West Oahu to downtown. A toll road could be part of the solution, but in time, a toll road will face congestion as well. There is also the issue of the cost of the toll, and I have read anywhere from \$6 to \$15 one way during rush hour is possible. Toll roads also encourage more driving when we should be looking at options to get people out of their automobiles.

Some opponents say we cannot afford a rail system. I say we cannot afford not to build one. The City had budgeted \$3.7 billion dollars for the project, and as the largest public works project on Oahu, it will create many construction jobs for area residents. A half percent increase in the general excise tax will raise most of the funds, and it should be noted that tourists' spending could pay up to 25% of the costs. We will also work with Senator Dan Inouye to secure hundreds of millions of dollars from our federal government. When the cost is spread out to all residents of Oahu, West Oahu and Ewa Beach will benefit from all residents helping to pay for the rail. It should be noted that potential riders will not only be the 900,000 plus residents of Oahu, but also our 7 million visitors each year.

A rail system will not eliminate traffic congestion. It is expected to reduce traffic by a small margin, but most importantly, it will give residents another option to commute. Without rail, traffic would get worse much sooner. Rail passengers, unlike drivers, will not be affected by car accidents, stalled vehicles, flat tires, debris in the road, bad rainy weather, or potholes. Rail users can also save on the high cost of car maintenance. In time as people see the value of rail, more people will use it. The bus system will be modified to feed into the rail system with transfers between buses and the rail being automatic.

More job opportunities in Kapolei, Ewa Beach, and West Oahu will reduce the number of commuters to town, and projects like U.H. West Oahu, Family Court, Ray Kroc Community Center, Ewa Industrial Park, Target Mall, DeBartolo Mall, Disney at Ko Olina, Hoakalei Resort and Marina in Ewa Beach will provide new jobs.

The Honolulu Advertiser recently ran stories on successful rail transit systems on the mainland, and although it has not been an easy road to get all the rail systems built, with gasoline now above \$4.35 a gallon, alternative forms of transportation are becoming very

appealing and popular. Cities on the mainland are experiencing an increase in rail ridership.

Opponents of rail have also said the project is about real estate development and not transportation. Riders will use it to commute, and the rail system will be a catalyst for new development around the transit stations. In transit-oriented development (TODs), affordable homes, childcare facilities, businesses, and other commercial establishments will want to be located at these stations because the rail line will provide easy access to the public. If new communities are built around stations, less agricultural land and rural land will be needed for our growing population. This in turn will help keep the country country.

Environmentally, the rail will expel less carbon into the air than automobiles and trucks. The rail will run on electricity so it is imperative that we aggressively work to use more solar, wind, wave, and waste-to-power energy for our electricity in order to reduce our reliance on finite supplies of fossil fuels.

A rail system is for the future. Thirty years from now, the wisdom of a rail system will be obvious and clear. Future generations must have multiple travel options. Rail systems have been beneficial around the world for over 100 years, and it's time for Oahu to get on board this train and improve the quality of life for our residents. If the City Council had not killed the rail system in 1992 by a 5 to 4 vote, we would be using a less-expensive rail system today. Let's not make that same mistake again. Please e-mail me at senespero@capitol.hawaii.gov to share your opinion on a rail system