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Editorial| Island Voices

## Still time to turn rail woe into bus way

By Randall Roth

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Rail was supposed to cost \$3 billion ... then \$4.6 billion ... then \$5.2 billion. The latest official estimate is \$8.1 billion ... but the city reportedly is thinking about raising it to \$9.5 billion.

The city's latest upper-bound estimate is \$10.8 billion. As that term is defined, there is only a 10 percent chance of costs reaching the upper-bound estimate. Two years ago, that estimate was \$7.6 billion.

The Federal Transit Administration advises against building rail unless money is set aside annually to ensure safety and reliability in future years. Based on experiences elsewhere, the minimum annual contribution should be \$100 million.

Actual ridership on recent rail projects around the country has averaged 40 percent less than had been predicted. The last elevated system built achieved ridership that was 75.9 percent less than had been projected. The consultant who prepared that projection, Parsons Brinkerhoff, also prepared ours.

The city claims that the percentage of commuters who use public transportation will increase from 6 percent to 7.4 percent once rail has been built. But most cities have experienced a decline in bus ridership as money is diverted from the existing bus system to pay for rail operations and maintenance. The combined rate for bus and rail is usually less than was the rate for just the bus.

For example, public transit's share of all commuting in Atlanta was 9.1 percent before rail was added in 1979; today it's less than 5 percent. The rate in Baltimore before it added rail in 1984 was 12.3 percent; today it's less than 8 percent. Portland went from 9.8 percent in 1986 to less than 8 percent today.

In the months leading up to our 2008 ballot referendum, the city spent millions promoting rail as a traffic solution. The city's director of transportation later admitted in the environmental impact statement that "traffic congestion will be worse in the future with rail than what it is today."

Based on U.S. Department of Transportation data, rail on Oahu will consume twice as much energy per-passenger-mile than does the existing bus system. Rail's per-passenger-mile energy use will even exceed the energy use of those who commute alone in their cars.

Steel-on-steel elevated systems make uniquely irritating sounds, particularly as the heavy cars accelerate and decelerate from 0 to 60 and back to 0 between stations sometimes only a half-mile apart.

As for unsightliness: The Outdoor Circle has described heavy rail as a scar on the face of our beautiful island.

The local chapter of the American Institute of Architects was so taken aback by heavy rail's ugliness that it created renderings it believes are more accurate than what the city has provided. Most audiences audibly gasp when shown these as part of a PowerPoint presentation.

The federal lawsuit to stop rail gave the plaintiffs access to FTA's internal email, which revealed intra-FTA concerns about the city's "lousy practices of public manipulation," use of "inaccurate statements," culture of "never [having] enough time to do it right, but lots of time to do it over," and an observation that the city had put itself in a "pickle" by setting unrealistic start dates for construction.

It's not too late to convert the existing guideway to use by bus rapid transit. Some of the saved money could then be used to reduce traffic congestion, such as by installing flyovers and bypasses in chokepoint areas like the Middle Street merge; adding new contraflow and bus-on-shoulder options; adding new traffic lanes to existing roads; and expanding Honolulu's bus system, such as by increasing the number of express buses that go where commuters want to go, rather than eliminating most of them, as is part of the current rail plan.

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