

Transit innovations impel shorter rail

By Cliff Slater and Randall Roth

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A group of self-driving Uber vehicles positioned themselves to take journalists on rides during a media preview at Uber's Advanced Technologies Center in Pittsburgh in 2016.

A recent editorial called on city and rail officials to finish rail construction without blowing through the budget ("City should stick to budget for rail," Star-Advertiser, March 7). There is reason to doubt their ability to do so. Rail's estimated construction cost was \$3 billion in 2006, according to then-Mayor Mufi Hannemann ("Rail cost

estimate: \$3 billion,” Honolulu Advertiser, June 23, 2006). Today, Mayor Kirk Caldwell’s latest estimate is \$8.2 billion.

Even that number is squishy in the eyes of the project’s management oversight contractor (“Rail watchdog ‘not confident’ \$8.2B price tag to remain fixed,” Oct. 20, 2017). Tellingly, the recent Star-Advertiser editorial described the current budget as “around \$9 billion.” Not long ago, Caldwell suggested that it be rounded up to \$10 billion.

City and HART officials continue to make the same mistakes. For example: Caldwell blamed HART’s former executive director, Dan Grabauskas, for losing control of construction costs, explaining, “We need a new executive director who has construction experience building rail. Dan Grabauskas did not have it. We need someone who says, ‘I’ve built rail systems and can tell you what’s going to happen next.’” The current executive director, Andrew Robbins, has extensive experience selling rail systems, but not building them.

The University of Hawaii Department of Civil and Environmental Engineering’s chairman, Panos Prevedouros, says it would cost at least \$13 billion to build rail to Ala Moana Center.

City and HART officials want eventually to extend rail to Manoa and Waikiki but there are “obstacles” (“5 plans take rail past Ala Moana face a host of obstacles,” Star-Advertiser, Feb. 25). The truth is that \$8.2 billion is barely enough to reach Middle Street, and rail cannot reach Manoa or Waikiki without a permanent extension of the rail tax. But that tax extension will be necessary just to operate and maintain rail.

Fortunately, a rail line terminating at Middle Street would let riders avoid major choke points. From there they could go directly to their desired destinations using public or private transit options.

Private transit is already a viable option for many riders. Ridership on TheBus has declined by more than a million rides per month over the past several years because of competition from ride-hailing companies like Uber and Lyft, and lower fuel prices. This competition will intensify dramatically when driverless vehicles reach a critical mass. Experts disagree on when that will be, but virtually all agree it’s just a matter of time.

Driverless vehicles have been in limited use on public roads for several years, but always with a backup driver ready to take control. This year California is doing away with the requirement of a backup driver. Chandler, Ariz., did that last year and Google’s Waymo driverless Chrysler Pacificas have already logged more than 4 million miles on public roads in the Phoenix area.

Huge efforts by major tech companies and car manufacturers will revolutionize transportation and render many public transit systems obsolete. Uber is already seeking public transit customers: “In eight U.S. cities, the ride-hailing company is rolling out a service called ‘Express Pool,’ which links riders in the same area who want to travel to similar destinations. Depending on time of day and metro area, Express Pool could cost up to 75 percent less than a regular Uber ride” (“Uber tells riders to take a walk for a cheaper ride,” Star-Advertiser, Feb. 21).

The good news is that Prevedouros believes rail to Middle Street would add significant value, even after transportation has been revolutionized. The basic idea is to provide a reliable travel time to Middle Street with a transfer to a convenient and affordable public or private short-haul service to downtown, Ala Moana, Waikiki, Manoa or wherever commuters want to go.

Billions would be saved by ending rail at Middle Street, and the cost of operating and maintaining rail would be reduced significantly. Win, win.

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