

A Better Solution for Rail

Because we do not have the funding to build rail to Ala Moana Center, many are suggesting the need for a shorter route that can provide a useful system, including our mayor, some HART board members, City Councilmembers, other politicians, and various media voices.

The situation is a blessing in disguise, allowing time to update projections on operating costs, climate change impacts, ridership, and more. It puts new focus on how far the tracks should extend and how to best continue travel service from an alternative terminus, none of which have yet been properly studied. Five different endpoints are being considered: Aloha Tower, Chinatown, Kalihi, Middle Street and Lagoon Drive.

TRANSFER STATIONS

Middle and Lagoon are ideal transfer terminals, in good position to work together sharing the passenger load. Travelers step off the train at the multimodal station, ride escalators to transfer platforms, board express vehicles, then sit down for direct rides to their destinations. Express routes along North King Street, Dillingham and Nimitz can take full advantage of our existing roads, which can be improved to enhance traffic flow, including some dedicated lanes and synchronized traffic signals. These routes can provide direct service to various destinations including Downtown, UH Manoa, Ala Moana and Waikiki.

This is not a proposal to “stop rail” or advocate for automobiles. It is a plan to increase the ridership and effectiveness of mass transit. Our major rush-hour traffic problem is along H-1, not on streets in the urban center, which have sufficient capacity to handle express buses. Much to its credit, the rail can offer some relief by giving H-1 drivers an alternative way to reach the edge of town, then transfer to express buses and similar vehicles.

The multimodal alternative fulfills the project’s original goals at a far lower construction cost without requiring further tax increases, and it could begin within two years. It also has the flexibility to incorporate new transportation technologies and routes, including electric autonomous vehicles of various sizes and routes that can be modified to meet demand.

FUTURE EXPANSION

If rail usage is high and funding can be secured, future extension of elevated rail is always an option, but expansion beyond Middle is not necessary or desirable at this time and faces enormous problems of funding, construction, and aesthetics which would only add further delays. Our downtown would be marred by an elevated structure blocking views of the waterfront and Aloha Tower and does not have a good location for a bus transfer station. Chinatown has similar issues, and extension to Kalihi, near the prison, is likewise unneeded. Infrastructure challenges along Dillingham have made these options extremely difficult. Fortunately, no contracts have been issued for construction beyond Middle Street, so no work need be done there unless the studies warrant it.

COMMON GOALS

Nearly everyone wants to see rail completed with the least expense to gain maximum benefit from our \$12.4 billion investment. Our goal should be creating the best multimodal transportation system with the largest total ridership, rather than focusing solely on rail. There is an urgent need to analyze the options now to get the system up and running as soon as possible within the existing budget to provide relief for Leeward travelers.

The Federal Transit Administration is waiting for our Updated Financial Plan at the end of this year and by all accounts is fed up and deeply embarrassed by our prolonged problems. In 2016 the FTA said we could “reduce the scope of the Project... perhaps (with) an interim terminus.” They will surely show support by issuing remaining funds when a reasonable plan is presented.