

# How the city misled the public

Despite chronic, troubling spin on facts, rail is not a done deal, a prominent quartet insists

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COURTESY AMERICAN INSTITUTE OF ARCHITECTS-HAWAII

This rendering shows what a rail station at the corner of Bishop Street and Nimitz Highway, at six stories high, might look like.

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The city has paid more than \$2 million in taxpayer money to 10 different public relations firms to promote its heavy-rail project. Here's what they have not yet told you:

## AIRCRAFT CARRIERS IN THE SKY

The local chapter of the American Institute of Architects (AIA) prepared renderings like the one above to help the public picture an elevated heavy-rail system on Oahu. The 20-mile railway would be at least three stories tall, held aloft by 720 large concrete columns. Some of the stations would be 10 stories high. One AIA member described the stations as "aircraft carriers in the sky."

A group like the AIA normally has a vested interest in supporting major construction projects. We admire its courage in providing a contrast to the city's deceptive renderings.

## **PARSONS BRINCKERHOFF TIES, HISTORY**

The mayor, City Council members and Honolulu Authority for Rapid Transportation (HART) board all lack expertise and experience with rail systems, so they must rely on others. Crucial information about the proposed rail project can be traced to one of three sources: Parsons Brinckerhoff, which has already received more than \$100 million in contracts from the city and stands to receive another \$300 million to \$400 million if the project is built; InfraConsult, a firm formed by three former Parsons Brinckerhoff employees, which the city hired to provide oversight on Parsons Brinckerhoff's work; and Wayne Yoshioka, who was recruited by Mayor Mufi Hannemann from Parsons Brinckerhoff to head up the city's Department of Transportation Services, and whose wife continues to work at Parsons Brinckerhoff.

Parsons Brinckerhoff has a history in Hawaii and elsewhere. For example, it was project manager on the H-3 freeway, which was finally built only because of Sen. Daniel

Inouye's influence in Congress, which exempted H-3 from federal environmental law.

Several years ago, the Bechtel/Parsons Brinckerhoff consortium was investigated for its work on the so-called Big Dig in Boston, and ended up paying \$407 million to avoid criminal and civil liability. A Boston TV station described Parsons Brinckerhoff as "infamous in Massachusetts," and linked with "shoddy work and cost overruns."

There is also a highly critical audit of Parsons Brinckerhoff's work in California as program manager of that state's high-speed rail project. The audit complains of "inadequate planning, weak oversight, and lax contract management."

Parsons Brinckerhoff worked on the Tren Urbano rail project in San Juan, Puerto Rico, which was projected to cost \$1 billion and enjoy high ridership. Instead, it sustained a 113 percent cost overrun and had actual ridership only 27 percent of the original forecast for 2010. A new 5.5 percent tax was enacted partly because of unforeseen rail costs.

## **THE AUTHORS**



From top left: Walter Heen was a state and federal judge, city councilman, legislator and Office of Hawaiian Affairs trustee; Benjamin Cayetano served as governor, lieutenant governor and legislator; Cliff Slater is a businessman who founded Maui Divers; Randall Roth is a professor at the William S. Richardson School of Law. They are plaintiffs in a lawsuit challenging the process by which the city chose elevated heavy rail over alternatives that would reduce traffic and protect the environment.

## **STACKING THE DECK**

When Jeremy Harris was mayor, Parsons Brinckerhoff said Bus/Rapid Transit (BRT) could accomplish virtually all of the objectives of rail at substantially less cost. A few years later when Hannemann was mayor, Parsons Brinckerhoff excluded BRT from the alternatives analysis despite a federal requirement that the city objectively evaluate "all reasonable alternatives."

Hannemann repeatedly portrayed rail as a solution to Oahu's existing traffic congestion problem. Mayor Peter Carlisle has echoed that message. Yet city transit chief Yoshioka now acknowledges that "traffic congestion will be worse in the future with rail than what it is today without rail."

Yoshioka's admission is not some off-hand comment: It was written, reviewed, and included in the environmental impact study that was approved by the Federal Transit Administration (FTA).

## **DAMAGE TO ENVIRONMENT**

The city's portrayal of heavy rail as friendly to the environment would be laughable if the subject were not so serious. Construction of the proposed system would lead to the large-scale development of prime farmland and change forever the Hawaiian sense of place. Imagine the sound of each 72,000-pound, steel-on-steel elevated rail car as it accelerates to 60 miles per hour and then decelerates to a stop between each of 21 stations, every three minutes in each direction.

The elevated railway would permanently diminish the mauka/

makai views along the entire route, and the ambiance of Honolulu's waterfront would be particularly affected.

The city claims that rail would save energy. However, U.S. Department of Energy data shows that, except in heavily populated urban centers, rail requires more energy per rider than do automobiles. The smallest urban center with heavy rail is four times larger than Honolulu. No wonder virtually every environmental group in Hawaii opposes heavy rail despite the city's false claims that it would be a "green" project.

## **UNREALISTIC COST ESTIMATE AND RIDERSHIP**

The city claims that elevated heavy rail would cost no more than \$5.3 billion, but the facts indicate otherwise. Cost overruns on rail systems elsewhere have averaged 40 percent, and an independent study by the highly regarded IMG group predicted total costs for heavy rail in Honolulu of at least

\$7 billion. The FTA's probabilities study concluded that the probability of spending \$7 billion was far greater than the probability of coming in on budget.

The federal government has compared actual ridership with forecasts in the cities that actually built rail systems and found that these cities overestimated ridership by an average of 41 percent.

When the city prepared environmental impact studies in 1982, 1992 and 2003, it forecast significant increases in bus ridership each time, but ridership declined instead. Yet the city is once again touting wildly optimistic forecasts for rail ridership. These ignore that the most recent population forecast for Honolulu shows that the number of people 20 to 64 years old in the year 2030 is expected to be less than the number today. This age group includes the vast majority of commuters.

The city has also cherry-picked data. It relies upon a 2004 30-year population forecast even though the 2008 30-year population forecast indicates 100,000 fewer people in 2030 than was previously forecasted.

Even with such cherry-picking and wildly optimistic forecasting, however, the city reluctantly acknowledges that if rail were to be built, another \$100 million would need to be "found" each year, just to keep the trains running. The obvious sources are substantially higher fares for riders and substantially higher taxes for everyone.

## **ARCHAEOLOGICAL ANALYSIS**

Federal statutes require that a new transportation system protect historic landmarks, environmental and cultural resources, and native burial sites from unnecessary degradation. H-3 is a perfect example of what can happen when archeological and environmental studies are done in segments rather than completely (i.e., it took 20 years and the final cost was more than 10 times the original estimates). The project manager for H-3, Parsons Brinckerhoff, is also the project manager for the current rail project.

The city is now making a similar mistake by trying to start construction before identifying the sensitive sites in Segment 4, which includes Kakaako and Downtown Honolulu where the bulk of problems are likely to be found. Environmental policy frowns on such "segmented studies" because by the time problems in later segments are detected, alternative routes and technologies are greatly limited (i.e., once a line has been started the city cannot simply zigzag around problem areas).

The city was given permission to delay the bulk of its archaeological analysis because state Department of Land and Natural Resources

Director William Aila approved such a segmented approach. Aila said he did so because the FTA "required" it. We don't know if he was misled by others or just mistaken, but his statement is patently false.

## **EXAGGERATED JOB CREATION**

The city initially claimed that rail would create 17,000 new jobs during the construction phase, but later lowered its estimate to 10,166, without explanation. Even this number is pure fiction.

The \$483 million construction contract went to Kiewit, which said it needed 350 workers to build the first segment. The same workers would probably end up building the remaining segments, because the plan is to build the system in segments, not all at once.

An Italian company, Ansaldo, expects to receive more than \$1 billion for providing and maintaining the trains and rail system. It is promising "300 local jobs for local people."

If you are counting, we have identified 650 new jobs. The city has yet to identify the other 9,516 that it has promised.

### **WORSENING COMMUTE**

The city has led people to think they could drive their cars to nearby rail stations, then ride a train into town. But the city is planning to provide parking at only four of the 21 stations. Where will commuters park their cars? The airport charges \$15 per day.

The city has also said little about its plan to force existing bus riders to take the train by replacing express and direct-route buses with ones that "feed" the train. Most bus riders currently can find a seat on a bus in and out of town. Most train commuters would have to stand the entire way.

### **TRANSIT-ORIENTED DEVELOPMENT FLAWED**

Many rail supporters see it as an opportunity to redevelop property around the 20-mile rail line. So-called transit-oriented development was behind rail projects in other cities. The city has not made clear, however, that those cities have had to paid huge subsidies to entice developers, and even then transit-oriented development has been an overall bust.

Professors from University of California-Berkeley studied BART's impact on land development. Here's what they found, in their words: "Notwithstanding 30 years of demolition and construction, most near-BART housing is what it was and where it was two decades ago. Contrary to expectations, we found that population has grown faster away from BART than near it."

### **NOT A DONE DEAL**

The city has tried to create the impression that heavy rail is a "done deal," such as by conducting a fake groundbreaking earlier this year. The FTA has limited the city to relocating utilities, so starting construction now without that agency's approval would eliminate any chance of federal funding. Moreover, Congress has yet to approve full funding for the project. And finally, our lawsuit alleges that the city, in rushing the project, violated federal law. If we prevail, the rail project will be halted.

We believe that elevated heavy rail would adversely impact the environment, economy and people of this state without reducing traffic congestion. We also believe the city has systematically misled the public. We have nothing to gain financially by stopping the current rail project, other than benefits that would flow to other local citizens. We believe our lawsuit will

lead to an affordable traffic solution that protects the environment and preserves the qualities that make Hawaii special.