

Federal Transit Administration Questioned Honolulu Rail Boondoggle

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Internal emails reveal that Federal Transit Administration officials were skeptical of Honolulu's plan to spend \$5.3 billion on a 20-mile rail transit line. City voters approved this line only after an expensive and hard-fought campaign. One FTA email accused the city of Honolulu of "lousy practices of public manipulation" and argued that the FTA should not only avoid being associated with it, it should "call them on it."

This and other documents were turned over to plaintiffs in a lawsuit arguing that the city's environmental impact statement (EIS) failed to consider a full range of alternatives. In a 2006 comment on the city's plans to write the EIS, FTA staffer James Ryan noted, "We seem to be proceeding in the hallowed tradition of Honolulu rapid transit studies: never enough time to do it right, but lots of time to do it over."

Another FTA official, Joseph Ossi, replied, "This isn't an FTA issue. Let the city deal with it. They have produced 3 failed projects and are well on their way to a fourth, so why is FTA wasting time on the City's problems?"

"This is different," a third FTA staffer, Raymond Sukys, answered. "This time [thanks to a tax increase] they have a huge cash flow which will build something. It seems likely that we will get involved in litigation again especially since we have an erroneous NOI out there. I do not think the FTA should be associated with their lousy practices of public manipulation and we should call them on it." The "NOI" is the "notice of intent" to prepare an environmental impact statement, and Sukys apparently thought Honolulu's NOI was insufficient because it failed to identify a full range of alternatives.

When the EIS was published, the Environmental Protection Agency apparently agreed, as Ossi wrote in 2009, "the EPA has recently submitted a letter questioning why alternatives to an elevated rail line, such as light rail at street level and bus rapid transit, weren't evaluated in the project's environmental impact study. . . . Unless we have good justification in the public NEPA record for eliminating the EPA alternative from

consideration,” Ossi continues, “we would be extremely vulnerable in a NEPA suit, and there are numerous potential litigants.”

These emails were released to the public by former Hawaii Governor Ben Cayetano, who is running for Mayor of Honolulu. Cayetano says he thinks the city has higher priorities than building a rail line.

In response to the released emails, Secretary of Immobility Ray LaHood assured the Senate Appropriations Committee—which is chaired by Hawaii Senator Daniel Inouye, who is well known for bringing pork home to his state—that the Department of Transportation is happy to give hundreds of millions of dollars of taxpayer funds to Honolulu for the rail line. The \$250 million that LaHood proposes to give Honolulu in 2013 is “the largest single item in the Department’s New Starts portfolio,” no doubt because of Inouye’s political influence.

“This will deliver people all over the island,” LaHood said, apparently in the belief that Oahu is only 20 miles long and zero miles wide. Oahu is actually nearly 600 square miles, nearly 99 percent of which is more than one-half mile from (and thus effectively inaccessible to) one of the planned rail stations. Of course, LaHood has clearly shown that he cares about building trains than about either alternatives or the cost effectiveness of those trains.

Rail opponents are confident that they can win their lawsuit. However, the city has allocated a million dollars to fight the suit. The city seems to think it will be cheaper to outspend the opponents than to go back and revise the EIS, which would force it to admit that just about any alternative would be more cost effective than the proposed high-cost, low-capacity rail line.