

Inside My Reporting on Honolulu's Rail Project

The goal was to tie together the many bits and pieces of information as Hawai'i's largest public works project reached a crucial decision point.

Noelle Fujii-Oride

November 9th, 2021

Hawaii Business Magazine just published a 26-page report on Honolulu's rail project in the November 2021 issue and online [here](#).

This project has already been extensively covered by local media in bits and pieces, but we felt it important to tie it all together. So I dug through county and Honolulu Authority for Rapid Transportation reports, meeting minutes and audits to explain how the project's costs have grown to \$12.45 billion and why its expected completion date has been delayed by 11 years.

Much of the information is presented in infographics to make it accessible and easy to understand. Much of my reporting focuses on that \$12.45 billion: How much has been spent so far and on what, including how much was spent on change orders to existing contracts, and why the projected cost of rail keeps going up and up.

Most importantly, I provide context to the masses of information available about rail. That context is crucial for a project that still has 10 years to go and will cost an estimated \$3.5 billion more than all the tax money and other funding already collected or forecast to be collected.

I built a [timeline](#) of current and past rail attempts to provide readers with context on just how long this project has been in the making. And I included facts about the finished project, such as the time it'll take a train to get from one end in East Kapolei to the planned terminus at Ala Moana Center, how many people the driverless trains will carry, and how much fares will be.

Story Sourcing

The rail has a long history of both heated opposition and devoted followers. I talked with well-known critics of the rail project, including Panos Prevedouros, a retired UH civil engineering professor; Randall Roth, a retired UH law professor and a plaintiff in a 2011 lawsuit that tried to stop rail; Randal O'Toole, a senior fellow at the Cato Institute, and Joe Kent, executive VP of the Grassroot Institute of Hawaii.

I also interviewed supporters of the project to hear why they made their decisions: former Honolulu Mayor Mufi Hannemann, often considered the father of the current rail project; Gary Okino, a longtime city planner and former council member; and Toru Hamayasu, whose city career began as a civil engineer in 1972. Hamayasu later established the city's rapid transit division and oversaw the rail project until he retired in 2012 after a year as HART's first interim executive director.

Those were just seven of the people I spoke with – there were many others. But one challenge with any article is knowing you won't be able to speak with everyone involved. My goal was to provide a big-picture look at the rail project, so I sought out sources who could help with that goal.

Digging Through Data

I wanted to identify which companies were making the most money from this project, but this proved more difficult than I imagined.

HART releases a progress report each month with a list of contracts by contract packaging plan number. These lists contain each contract packaging plan title, original contract value, value of change orders, current contract value, amount incurred and the award and completion dates. The contractors are not listed. Some contracts look like they have not yet been awarded.

To find the contractors, I looked in HART's "Contracts" folder and matched the contract names and original contract values with the information on the contract packaging plan list from HART's July 2021 monthly progress report. The "Contracts" folder contains contract agreements, special provisions, related attachments and exhibits, and general terms and conditions for 75 awarded contracts for work relating to construction, real estate acquisition, legal counsel, art, project management and staff searches. The "Contracts" folder does not use CPP numbers and does not include some newer contracts.

Crucial Info Missing

HART's July monthly progress report lists 84 contracts; I could identify contractors for only half of them.

Joey Manahan, HART's director of government relations and public involvement, and Colleen Hanabusa, HART board chairwoman, did not know why the information in the "Contracts" folder failed to match the information in the monthly progress report. Hanabusa told me she has asked the rail authority similar questions. That's a serious problem if even HART's board chair does not have crucial information on how the money has been spent.

Most of my data came from that July monthly progress report, which contained updates on several key contracts, the project's financial progress and schedule, and HART staffing. I also looked through many other HART DocuShare folders to read legislative updates, HART board meeting minutes, reports made to the Federal Transit Administration's project management

oversight consultant and planning documents. A full list of sources can be found in the article [here](#).

I welcome your feedback; feel free to let me know if you have other questions, or to tell me what you liked/didn't like.