

City rail plan taking longer to build than Great Pyramid

POSTED: 01:30 a.m. HST, Jul 15, 2011

Historians, architects and archaeologists all estimate that it took between 20 and 30 years to build the Great Pyramid (King Khufu) at Giza. Of course, this construction project was started more than 4,500 years ago.

In Honolulu there are actual records dating back to 1969 of a former Honolulu mayor (Frank Fasi) starting planning studies for a Honolulu rail system. It may not be geologic time, but 42 years is still a long time to wait for a train that may not be coming. Since then, the rail system has been started, stopped, prioritized, rescinded, eulogized, revived and now demonized.

This project was first expected to cost \$3 billion. Former Mayor Mufi Hannemann was described as being "adamant" that Honolulu not buy a Cadillac Escalade of a transit system.

"I am insisting at this point that we build a basic, no-frills system, and I want the cost to come in around \$3 billion because there are those who are opposed to this project that are trying to make an issue of the cost of this rail system," Hannemann said in September of 2006.

Now in 2011, although the city has claimed several construction bids have come in lower than projections, the project is now pegged at \$5.3 billion.

Hannemann is no longer mayor so he can't glare at the transit bean counters for getting the numbers so wrong.

But the controversy remains. In 2008, Honolulu voters split 53 percent to 47 percent in favor of the transit plan, and since then other independent polls have shown that a Honolulu rail line has just a bit more than a majority of support. A study done by the city not surprisingly showed just 40 percent opposition.

There is a lot of reason to show concern. The train won't go to two critical spots, the University of Hawaii

at Manoa and Waikiki because city officials said it was too expensive. The decidedly ugly plan, featuring stations that look like aircraft carriers cantilevered off the side of a freeway, has yet to show it will realistically spur thoughtful development or make already blighted areas such as Pearl City anything more than bigger strip mall developments.

Now the transit plan has drawn the protests of a formidable group under the umbrella organization Honolulu Traffic. The unpopularity of the project has managed to unite elements of Hawaii's fledgling tea party movement with Democratic standard bearers such as former Gov. Ben Cayetano and former state appellate judge Walter Heen.

The group is suing in federal court to stop the project. If it doesn't win, it will at least delay construction.

Hawaii's courts have the capacity to hold the red-hot issue of the day for so long that even the most intense fire can burn out before a decision is finally reached. It would not be unlikely for the same to happen with the city's transit plan.

If the city can't show any real new development around the 36 planned stations, the anti-rail contingent has yet to show its own alternative traffic solution.

Honolulu's real traffic jam is the city's inability to move a plan that has overwhelming public support.

Richard Borreca writes on politics on Sundays, Tuesdays and Fridays. Reach him at rborreca@staradvertiser.com.

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