

Civil war over rail project tests Honolulu's endurance

By Jay Fidell

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Last week, ThinkTech and the Hawaii Venture Capital Association presented a program titled "The Press Weighs In on Rail," with Mayor Peter Carlisle, then two panels of journalists.

One panel examined "how good the coverage has been on rail" with panelists Jerry Burris, Richard Halloran, Mark Platte and Barbara Tanabe. The other examined "what we don't know about rail" with panelists Mark Abramson, Michael Levine, Ian Lind, Neal Milner and Malia Zimmerman.

Rail is the biggest, most expensive and disruptive public works project we've ever had. It is also the most divisive and litigation-ridden project we've ever had, and makes Superferry look like a piker. Now we are engaged in a great civil war over it, testing whether our city can long endure.

So we told our panels we didn't want a debate on rail. But what we got instead was a study on stonewalling, where we found that the trouble with rail is not so much rail as it is governance. Indeed, a disturbing picture emerged, a picture of the press being thwarted by the city's efforts to manage public opinion.

Big projects have big risks for the community, so it's all the more important that the public be fully informed and included in the planning. That didn't happen in the last administration or in this one. The public needs to have full access to costs, benefits, impacts, payment sources, alternatives, contracting, risks, disruptions, design, engineering and everything else. It's an absolute.

At his turn, Milner, a professor emeritus of political science at the University of Hawaii at Manoa, said we needed to finish the political phase before moving to the "technical" phase, but that hasn't been the case. Surrounded by controversy, the city rushed into contract and tells us now that any delay will cost \$10 million a day, the implication being that he who would oppose or delay the project will cost us millions. So whose fault is that?

And why has the city spent millions doing public relations and advertising campaigns dedicated to neutralizing public opposition to rail? The city has spent prodigious amounts of taxpayer money, even down to hiring bloggers, to convince us that rail should go ahead. Is this a proper use of public funds?

For the public to be properly informed, we must have a free and unhampered press. Anything that obstructs the press from its vigil strikes at the heart of our democracy. It's not a small matter when the press tells us that it's been systematically denied access to public information. Just as the recent Star-Advertiser editorial called for transparency on rail, the great majority of our panelists weighed in with concerns over the lack of such transparency.

If the press can't get this information, we don't get it. If it is manipulated, we are manipulated. In these days of joylessness about the economy and public finances, we rely on the press to dig deep, find the truth, report all the news and, in so doing, protect us from wasteful or ill-advised public projects.

If that means putting more reporters on a story, or spending more time and money for investigative reporting, or hiring counsel to enforce Freedom of Information Act requests for documents and information, then so be it. If that means the media need to raise prices and subscriptions, then so be it.

The price of good government includes the price of a vigilant press. Andrew Jackson said the price of liberty is eternal vigilance, but it's hard to say we've been paying that price. If we had it to do again, many of us would welcome higher prices to enable that vigilance. Here it might have saved us billions.

Construction has started, but what a kettle of fish: a public that is completely polarized; a \$6 billion project in deepening controversy; a lawsuit; a mandate election with a candidate sworn to deep-six the project; and a frustrated press that has been denied access to primary sources. Thank you, Messrs Mayor.

This divisiveness didn't have to happen. It reflects unacceptable strategies by two successive administrations, and we're suffering for that. As Ian Lind said, "The lack of transparency here wasn't the problem; it was the plan." We need to learn by what has happened and insist on total transparency from now on.

Rail is what it is and we are where we are. Now that construction has started, we need to examine the realities and look for rapprochement before it tears us apart. But whatever happens on rail, we have to think twice before voting for anyone who has played the press, misled the public or abused our trust.

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