

Honolulu errs in putting all transit eggs in 1 basket

When city leaders began the latest attempt to build a mass transit system for Oahu, I should have known that those plans could veer off course.

After all, the city's track record for projects large and small has never been flawless.

I should have known that the price tag had been lowballed, that the cost would nearly double as vague outlines became blueprints. I should have known that decisions about routes and equipment would be subject to political maneuvering. I should have known that public concerns about noise, view planes, technology, energy efficiency, environmental degradation, accessibility, convenience and other matters would be shrugged off as babble from persistent naysayers and tree-hugging activists.

Yet, as did many who saw the advantages of a good public transport system, I supported the idea and still do. I still believe it is the right way to go, but the choices city leaders have made thus far will produce an inflexible system ill-suited for this small island, its businesses and its people.

It is not too late to switch gears and put together a transit network that will fit our needs for the approaching decades with enough elasticity to accommodate more — or less — as unpredictable circumstances evolve.

Choices made today will resonate more acutely than in years past. Oahu's resources — primarily land, water and coastlines — have become scarce assets as growth in population and accompanying needs for services and infrastructure press hard on what there is left to harness.

Suburban development of agriculture land can no longer be cavalierly supported as it was in the previous century. With shorelines disappearing from view, proposals for resorts that will further obstruct them become untenable.

Decisions on these issues cannot be made piecemeal, without considering the effects on the whole of the island and the community.

That's why the rail project has given rise to conflict. It isn't just about transportation. It could saddle government and taxpayers with unsustainable perpetual expenses. Its concrete columns and stations will mar the landscape. Its claims for energy — notionally green, but coal- and oil-black in reality — will remain as unbending as its steel-on-steel technology, which won't be easily retrofitted.

More than any other factor, however, is that once the thing is built, we are stuck with it. Worrisome enough as that is, the city set off another alarm when it made a preliminary deal with a financially and management-troubled company to build, operate and maintain the system.

Legal challenges have been sparked by this choice, but the city continues to defend its decision even as leaders acknowledge they did not duly investigate the company's background nor take a good look at other problem projects in which it was involved.

The rail venture is said to be the largest public works undertaking in the city's history, which may be its affliction. Politicians love big. They favor brawny showpieces even when smaller strategies may be sensible and more effective.

Honolulu is putting billions of dollars in one huge basket. Doing so without examining other options, including distributed transportation components in an integrated network, is a big mistake.

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