

Mayoral election slows feds on funding

An agreement to secure billions for Honolulu's mass transit project could be set by the end of the year

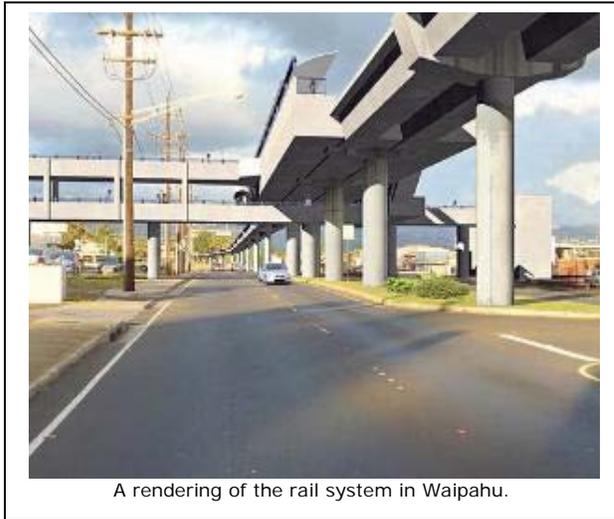
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Special to the Star-Advertiser

POSTED: 01:30 a.m. HST, Sep 21, 2012

WASHINGTON » Uncertainty about the outcome of the Honolulu mayoral election may have prompted the Federal Transit Authority to delay its decision on whether to award federal funds to the city for its planned rail transit project.

Hawaii officials say they have been told by staff with the FTA that the agency will not sign off on the grant agreement until after the November election.



A rendering of the rail system in Waipahu.

Former Gov. Ben Cayetano is making a strong run for Honolulu mayor, and emerged as the top vote-getter in the August primary election. Cayetano has promised he will stop the rail project if he is elected.

The FTA said Thursday that a \$1.55 billion federal funding agreement for the stalled Honolulu rail project could be signed by the end of the year, which would be about three months later than the city had planned.

As recently as June, officials with the Honolulu Authority for Rapid

Transportation predicted they would finalize the full funding grant agreement by the end of October, which would be a major milestone for the rail project because it would finally secure federal funding.

The new year-end estimate for the award of federal funds emerged as a delegation of Honolulu officials finished a two-day lobbying trip to Capitol Hill to meet with FTA officials, including agency Administrator Peter Rogoff.

They also met with top representatives and senators on transportation and financial committees, briefing them on the impact of a state Supreme Court decision that stopped construction on the \$5.26 billion rail project.

Brian Farber, spokesman for the FTA, said in a statement that the meeting with Rogoff was "productive."

"We look forward to signing a full funding agreement ... by the end of the calendar year, barring any unforeseen complications," Farber said. Rogoff was not available for interviews after the meeting.

Honolulu Mayor Peter Carlisle, who led the group, said he was pleased that the representatives and senators they met with had an awareness of the project and of its need.

"The depth of their appreciation of the difficulties we have in Honolulu because of the traffic situation was impressive and gratifying," he said. "All of these people to a person expressed a willingness to support our efforts."

Carlisle also said FTA officials indicated they had all the technical information needed to process the grant application.

"It's now in their ballpark to do what they need to do to move it forward," he said.

<t\$>Daniel Grabauskas, executive director of HART, said that once the grant application leaves the FTA, it will go to the Office of Management and Budget for review, which will take about 30 days, and then Congress will have another 60 days to review it.

HART Chairwoman Carrie Okinaga said it was important to have the group brief federal officials on the Supreme Court decision, its potential impact on the project's budget and schedule, and a motion to have the court reconsider its decision.

"It was important that they get the full briefing from us in person to make sure that they had the same information," she said.

The Hawaii Supreme Court ruled Aug. 24 that the State Historic Preservation Division should not have allowed the city to begin construction on the \$5.26 billion rail project until the city completed an archaeological survey along the entire 20-mile rail route.

HART then stopped all construction, and the city now predicts it could take as long as nine months to complete the survey, with the delay costing \$7 million to \$10 million a month.

Ernie Martin, chairman of the City Council, said it was important to show lawmakers and federal officials in Washington that the city remains confident about the project.

"Even though we are in an election year, I think we're in good standing to continue to have a strong basis of support," he said.

Among others, the Honolulu group met with the staffs of Sen. Daniel Inouye, chairman of the Senate Appropriations Committee; Rep. Nick Rahall, D-W.Va., top Democrat on the House Transportation Committee; and Sen. Tim Johnson, D-S.D., chairman of the Senate Banking, Housing and Urban Affairs Committee.

Peter Boylan, spokesman for Inouye, said the senator "remains confident in the federal support pledged for the rail project."

Also on the meeting list were Rep. John Mica, R-Fla., chairman of the House Transportation Committee; Rep. John Duncan, R-Tenn., chairman of the House Highways and Transit subcommittee; and Rep. Colleen Hanabusa, D-Hawaii, who sits on the House Transportation Committee.

Patrick Newton, spokesman for Duncan, characterized the city officials' visit as a "courtesy" meeting similar to those that occur frequently with delegations from all over the country.

Star-Advertiser reporter Kevin Dayton contributed to this report.