



Cayetano run for mayor would be a game-changer

By Richard Borreca

POSTED: 01:30 a.m. HST, Jan 06, 2012

Former Gov. Ben Cayetano ended his best-selling autobiography noting that he always made his decisions "without fear of the political consequences."

The decade since Cayetano left office has not dulled his capacity to charge full bore into the political dilemma of the day.

As governor, Cayetano drove straight at the powerful public worker unions and challenged their entire working relationship with management. Now as a private citizen, he helped launch a legal challenge to the city's controversial and costly rail project.

Today he is toying with the idea of running for mayor with the intent of using the mayorship to bend the rail project into something not as grandiose as the currently planned \$5.3 billion project.

Cayetano says he is still about a week away from making a firm decision, although one has to wonder why bring it up if you haven't already made the decision.

If Cayetano goes, it will be a game-changer for the political year.

A two-term governor and lieutenant governor does not leave office empty-handed. Cayetano retains significant political capital and skill.

"He's a hard campaigner and he is very honest. Ben Cayetano comes out and says what he thinks." says Councilwoman Ann Kobayashi, who is a former co-chairwoman of Cayetano's gubernatorial campaigns.

Kobayashi, who says she asked Cayetano to run for mayor, describes the 72-year-old governor as someone who already is well-known to the public and can organize a campaign, raise the funds and then win the race.

Cayetano has easily done the intellectual groundwork for the campaign. As far back as 1977, Cayetano, then an elected state representative from Pearl City, was cautious about the city's first rail proposal under former Mayor Frank Fasi.

Then as now, Cayetano doubted that the city had done a good enough job exploring alternatives to the huge, landscape-scarring, irreversible concrete monolith of heavy rail.

To get to the point of halting the train, though, Cayetano has to win the mayorship of Honolulu. It is a difficult task on many levels.

First he has to get a campaign up and running within a matter of days; the open election is Aug. 11.

Win more than 50 percent of the vote and you are the new mayor of Honolulu. If no candidate has more than half, the top two candidates go on to the general election.

Cayetano will be running against Mayor Peter Carlisle, the incumbent who is filling out the last two years of former Mayor Mufi Hannemann's term.

Carlisle has a slim record as mayor, but is very popular. A Star-Advertiser/Hawaii News Now poll from May had the former city prosecutor with a 64 percent job approval rating.

Carlisle was the former "next best hope" for the Hawaii Republican Party. While serving as prosecutor he had been the master of ceremonies for two GOP state conventions and was widely considered strong GOP congressional timber. But when he ran for mayor, he said he was not a Republican and was nonpartisan and maintains he will not run for any other office.

Also mulling over the race is former acting Mayor Kirk Caldwell, whose candidacy would be a lot more popular with rank-and-file Democrats.

Both Caldwell and Carlisle share a strong support for rail. They are joined by Honolulu's big business, big labor and big politics contingents.

If you run against rail, you are running against U.S. Sen. Daniel K. Inouye, most labor unions, and most banks and developers who have already started mentally slicing up the property along the projected rail route.

A three-way race with Cayetano, Caldwell and Carlisle would probably favor Cayetano because the question of rail still divides the island.

If Caldwell doesn't run, Cayetano would be the underdog, punching up -- which, as I recall, is just the sort of race he enjoys.