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Federal and city officials ramp up rail melodrama

By [David Shapiro](#)

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Last week's meeting of city leaders and the Federal Transit Administration in San Francisco was more like an audition for the Academy Awards than a responsible attempt to fix what's wrong with Oahu rail.

It disappointed because until then, officials on both sides seemed finally serious about controlling runaway rail deficits.

As rail costs soared from \$5.2 billion to \$6.8 billion to \$8.3 billion to a worst-case projection of \$10.8 billion, the FTA — which put up \$1.55 billion — signaled flexibility on the route and number of stations and urged the city to “think outside the box.”

Mayor Kirk Caldwell sensibly suggested that rail stop at Middle Street while the city figures out how to stop the bleeding and raise the \$1.5 billion to \$3 billion more needed to finish the route to Ala Moana Center.

City Council Chairman Ernie Martin endorsed a Middle Street pause and said emphatically he wouldn't support another extension of the half-percent rail excise tax, insisting, “We need to build rail with what we got.”

The Honolulu Authority for Rapid Transportation, led by Colleen Hanabusa, pursued possible options that, in addition to stopping at Middle Street or Aloha Tower, included raising private capital, eliminating some of the 21 stations to save money, building part of the line at ground-level and avoiding Dillingham Boulevard and its costly utility relocations.

Then in San Francisco, hopes of more responsible leadership went “poof.”

The FTA reversed itself on flexibility, demanding that the city either build straight to Ala Moana or forfeit the federal share.

Caldwell abandoned pausing at Middle Street and begged to delay writing a rail recovery plan until the city can lobby next year's Legislature for another tax increase.

Martin dropped his pledge not to ask the Legislature for further tax extensions, saying he's seen the light and it's the “only way.”

Hanabusa cheered the political orchestration that reduced the range of options to only two: Either the Legislature writes another blank check without a credible plan to stop the bleeding, or rail is left hanging unfinished somewhere over Halawa .

Key legislators say it's a nonstarter, but the city and FTA are betting they'll cave in to the theatrics just as they did in 2015, when they gave a five-year tax extension that was promised to be enough to finish, only to see the rail deficit triple within months.

So after 10 years of deceit, mismanagement and failure, little has changed; Honolulu rail is being built on politics and melodrama instead of sound engineering and honest accounting.

Cries to stay the course at any price carry a steep cost for the community.

Our tax base is only so deep, and billions squandered on rail cost overruns are billions lost for addressing homelessness, massive pension debt, decaying infrastructure and climate change.

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