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The case for stopping rail at Middle Street

By Cliff Slater

Here are the pros and cons of stopping rail at the nine-acre Kalihi Transit Center at Middle Street:

First, it would stave off the impending devastation that elevated rail would bring to our waterfront and downtown. It would prevent what the Outdoor Circle declared, "In our 100-year history The Outdoor Circle has seen no other venture that holds the potential to degrade the landscape of Oahu as the proposed Honolulu Rail Transit project." They further describe the "horrific visual damage" and "an ugly scar across one of the most beautiful places on earth." Hawaii's 1000 Friends testified about, "the unprecedented visual blight that will impact our historic waterfront."

Second, the most expensive part of the rail project per mile is from Middle Street to Ala Moana Center. Shortening it would eliminate billions of dollars in construction costs.

Third, it would end the uncertainty of further billions in cost overruns in the final section from Middle Street to Ala Moana Center. These inevitable cost overruns would be paid by Hawaii taxes; the federal government contributes nothing to rail's current or future cost overruns.

Fourth, it would reduce the annual operating cost of rail, which the City projects as an additional \$100 million annually (likely understated) all to be paid for by increased property taxes.

Fifth, it would avert future years of traffic congestion that will result from rail construction and lane closings on Dillingham and Nimitz and the closing of Halekauwila Street.

The disadvantages of stopping rail at Middle Street are that instead of continuing on rail from Middle Street to Ala Moana Center, commuters would transfer to buses. Most passengers would take longer to get to their destination stations than if they were to continue by rail. However, many public transportation users will take less time to get to their final destination. For example, for those going to UH and environs a bus from Middle Street taking the Kalihi Street H-1 onramp will get to UH as fast as any projected rail option.ⁱ

Those working along the King/Beretania corridor could take a C bus or #1 or #2 buses from Middle Street along King Street and take 20-30 minutes to get level with Ala Moana Center rather than the 12 minutes that city promises rail will take (or the 16 minutes it will actually take).ⁱⁱ However, people are more likely to have faster access to their work places than if they went by rail because the bus stops are more central to workplaces than the waterfront route that rail would take.ⁱⁱⁱ

Some will claim that shortening rail will increase traffic congestion. However, since the City forecasts that a completed rail line will only reduce auto traffic by 1.7 percent from what it would be with no rail; it does not matter either way as these miniscule changes in congestion levels would not be noticeable.

The question for voters is whether the advantages of stopping at Middle Street justify the inconvenience of longer travel times for about 4 percent of commuters; only 7.9 percent of all commuters use public transportation and less than half of them would likely be inconvenienced.^{iv}

We suggest that those who have not seen the rail already constructed in West O'ahu should visit it. Then imagine this snaking its way along the waterfront and through our historic downtown where the

supporting pillars are 8 feet in diameter (the width of a city bus). And imagine the block-long stations every half-mile all the way through town. Do we really want this along our historic waterfront and through downtown?

And if you think that HART is managing the project well, think on this: HART has spent hundreds of millions of dollars in planning rail but never negotiated a firm contractual arrangement with HECO. Doesn't HART have a checklist? This omission alone is going to result in hundreds of millions of dollars in cost overruns.

The City's latest projections to complete rail is \$7 billion. Opponents of rail believe it will more likely be \$9.5 billion. Who do you believe is more likely to be right?

Cliff Slater is a Hawaii businessman and a 30-year opponent of elevated rail in Honolulu.

Endnotes:

i As an indicator, note that the #94 bus takes only 15 minutes from Alakea/Nimitz to UH Manoa Sinclair.

ROUTE 94 - VILLAGES OF KAPOLEI - KAUPEA EXPRESS Effective 6/8/15
 WEEKDAY A.M. Service: To Downtown
 A.M. Destination Sign: 94 EXPRESS DOWNTOWN-UNIVERSITY

I	H	E	T	Z
Kaiaua Kamaaaha	Kamaaaha Kuloa	Makakilo Farrington Hwy	Alakea Nimitz	UH-Manoa Sinclair
510a	522a	534a	630a	645a
530a	542a	554a	650a	705a

ii Allowing only 4 minutes to travel between five stations between the Iwilei and Kaka'ako stations is highly optimistic. See table below:

Table 3-16 Fixed Guideway Station-to-Station Travel Times—2030

From Station	To Station	Travel Time Between Stations (in minutes, including dwell time)
East Kapolei	UH West O'ahu	2
UH West O'ahu	Ho'opili	4
Ho'opili	West Loch	2
West Loch	Waipahu TC	3
Waipahu TC	Leeward CC	2
Leeward CC	Pearl Highlands	1
Pearl Highlands	Pearlridge	4
Pearlridge	Aloha Stadium	3
Aloha Stadium	Pearl Harbor NB	2
Pearl Harbor NB	Airport	3
Airport	Lagoon Drive	2
Lagoon Drive	Middle Street TC	2
Middle Street TC	Kalihi	2
Kalihi	Kapalama	2
Kapalama	Iwilei	2
Iwilei	Chinatown	1
Chinatown	Downtown	1
Downtown	Civic Center	1
Civic Center	Kaka'ako	1
Kaka'ako	Ala Moana	2
Total Travel Time		42

CC = Community College TC = Transit Center NB = Naval Base

And we should remember that Ala Moana Center is not a rush hour destination; it does not open until 10AM.

iii People working more than a ¼ mile (10 minute walk) from the nearest rail stop will likely want a bus connection.

^{iv} For example, none of the Windward and East Honolulu bus commuters would be affected. Nor would many commuters in town since local bus services would be more convenient.

The 7.9 percent of commuters using public transportation <http://www.census.gov/hhes/commuting/files/2014/acs-32.pdf>