

Community Voice

What Honolulu Rail Officials Know They Don't Know

Nobody has confidence in estimates of the project's expense, which may be as much as \$13 billion.

By Randall Roth  Cliff Slater  / About 9 hours ago



The mayor and the Honolulu City Council are haggling over a \$44 million funding gap for rail, while pretending the latest construction cost estimate of \$8.165 billion is chiseled in granite.

In truth, nobody has confidence in that number — not the project's official oversight manager, not the Federal Transit Administration, not even the mayor.

Panos Prevedouros, chair of the University of Hawaii Department of Civil and Environmental Engineering, thinks a more likely cost would be \$13 billion, but unlike city officials, he stresses the inherent unknowability of

what the actual amount will be.

Unknowability is why no bonded contractor will contractually agree to build rail to Ala Moana for a fixed price that would bring the costs within the current \$8.165 billion forecast, or even \$13 billion.



Rail work along the Kamehameha Highway. The authors believe that the true costs of the project may be as high as \$13 billion.

Just about everyone — including rail critics like us — thought construction would go smoothly until Middle Street, where building conditions worsen dramatically.

More specifically, that's where rail's construction contractor will begin to confront a host of known unknowns, such as unmapped utilities, uncertain subsoil, large amounts of iwi, and potentially catastrophic impacts on existing structures.

Asked for an example of how downtown rail construction could impact an existing structure, Prevedouros points to the now-tilting Millennium Tower

in San Francisco, which already has spawned billions of dollars in lawsuits.


How Much For Operation And Maintenance?

Another known unknown is the eventual cost of operating and maintaining rail, not to mention a funding source. In 2027, when the rail is supposedly to be fully operational, the city forecasts annual subsidies (losses) of \$460,000,000 for all public transportation. That is more than double the city forecast for the current year.

These known unknowns are in addition to challenges no one has yet to consider — the unknown unknowns.

Meanwhile, city officials are “whistling past the graveyard,” as they pretend to know all about the many unknowns. As best we can tell, their strategy is simply not to be around when the actual tab — as opposed to their feel-good cost estimate of “only” \$8.165 billion — finally arrives.

Polls suggest a majority of the public wants to finish rail and stay within the existing budget. Both can be achieved only by finishing rail at the Middle Street Transit Center, where riders can transfer to coordinated options such as pooled ride-hailing and high-tech versions of Honolulu’s award-winning bus service.



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Prevedouros believes such a plan would give taxpayers substantial value for their money already spent on rail, by getting people beyond both the H-1 and H-2 and the Middle Street merges while avoiding untold billions in construction costs and freeing up any saved construction financing to pay for operations and maintenance.

Most rail commuters will need to transfer at least once in any event. Consider this example: If rail were built to Ala Moana Center, it would take 12 minutes to get there from Middle Street by rail, and then another 16 minutes by bus to University of Hawaii Manoa — a total of 28 minutes. But if rail terminates at Middle Street, a UH student can get to Manoa by express bus in about 20 minutes.

There is going to be rail. The key questions are, where will it terminate and what will it cost? At present, nobody can answer either of these questions with any degree of certainty.

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