

Clifford, Janine Shinoki with LeeLee Brown, Louise Eddleston and Cody Thornton.
Planning in Paradise II: Urban Redevelopment — Honolulu, Hawai'i. Harvard
University Graduate School of Design. 2005. p. 13.

Honolulu Rail Transit: A Faith-Based Initiative

By Cliff Slater

The Rail Renaissance of public transportation, beginning in 1972 with the opening of San Francisco's BART, occurred only because of the dramatic subsidies for public transportation provided by federal, state and local governments, which allowed sellers to provide services at prices that buyers were willing to pay-and subsidies that taxpayers were willing to underwrite. They were willing to do so in light of the "energy crisis" and the rapidly changing social and political landscapes of the 1960s and 1970s.

Today we can look back over past U.S. Census data and find that since the advent of the Rail Renaissance in 1974, no metro area with rail has succeeded in increasing the percentage of commuters using public transportation since their rail line was built.¹ Apologists for rail say that there are more commuters using public transportation in some metro areas since rail was built. That is true, but irrelevant. The percentage is the critical issue because in virtually every metro area, less than 10 percent of commuters use transit, while about 75 percent use autos. Therefore, as population grows, of every new 100 commuters, 10 will use transit and 75 will drive their cars. .

The failure to increase the percentage of commuters using transit is the fundamental reason why public transportation has not only resulted in worsened traffic congestion, but also why transit simply cannot ever reduce traffic congestion. Virtually all U.S. metro areas, including Honolulu, are growing and transit ridership is too small as a percentage of the commuter market to make any difference.

Honolulu has followed the rest of the nation in its demographic changes. Its increasing population has been moving to the suburbs thus lessening urban density. Greater affluence has led to more complicated commutes, such as going to exercise class before or after work, going to the supermarket or big box store, or picking up a child from school, none of which is practical with public transportation.

While the Honolulu urbanized area has the least miles of road per resident of any area in the U.S.,² its worst problem presently is the lack of capacity in the corridor between downtown and the leeward communities, such as Kapolei and Mililani. Commuters in these new suburbs use transit far less than in-town commuters and would be better served with a mostly elevated highway configured as HOT lanes, that is, two lanes into town in the morning, reversible around midday, that would allow buses and van pools free use while filling the remaining capacity with automobiles paying a toll.³

Two free flowing highway lanes have a far greater capacity than any rail line. Each lane has the capacity for moving 1,000 buses per hour with 70 passengers each, or 140,000

passengers per hour. This compares with the heaviest used rail line, New York's 8th Avenue IND, at 43,500 per hour.⁴ Of course, such bus capacity would never get used, but it demolishes the argument that a single rail line equals 12 freeway lanes.

The primary function of the toll, dynamically re-priced every few minutes, is to manage the highway,⁵ that is, to keep it full but free-flowing at all times and thus maximize the throughput of vehicles. It would allow City express buses, currently stuck in traffic, to make two trips instead of the current one trip. It would offer bus riders service that is near door to door instead of the bus-train-bus multiple transfer option that most commuters would need to undertake.

Our urban planners have to understand what planners of the 1920s understood, that rail transit alone will do little for traffic congestion.⁶ They must also recognize that congestion pricing is the only measure that has ever eliminated traffic congestion.⁷ Economics and urban history are tools, as essential to the planning tool kit as the imagination, the computer, or even the pencil.

The full version of this article with footnotes is available at www.lava.net/cslater/hds.htm

¹ <http://www.honolulutraffic.com/jtw80-00C.pdf>

² <http://www.fhwa.dot.gov/ohim/hs00/hm72.htm>

³ <http://www.honolulutraffic.com/hotway2.htm>

⁴ <http://www.honolulutraffic.com/passperhour.htm>

⁵ http://www.lta.gov.sg/motoring_matters/index_motoring_erp.htm

⁶ Editorial. Cassier's Magazine 31. March 1907. p. 456.

Sussna, Stephen, "Zoning as a Remedy," Traffic Quarterly, Vol. XVI, no. 3, July 1962, p. 434.

⁷ http://www.lta.gov.sg/motoring_matters/index_motoring_erp.htm