

League of Women Voters Testimony on the Budget, May 18, 2009

I am Pearl Johnson, speaking for the League of Women Voters of Honolulu.

The League has 2 major areas of concern which must be considered before any money is appropriated for the rail project: funding and outstanding unresolved issues relating to the project itself.

Let's consider funding. The City says it expects to receive \$1.4 billion from the federal government. This amount has been variously estimated by the City to be as little as \$600,000 to \$900,000 to billion to \$1.2 billion. There is no certainty that any federal funds at all will be forthcoming. And if they are not, how are we going to afford this big project? Once you start it, you are committed. Can we start without the iron-clad assurance that there will be money to complete it? Even more so when the administration insists on building it from the outside in, guaranteeing NO riders until a sizable portion is completed.

Second, how much money has been collected by the increase in the GET? Is that money in the state or city coffers? Did the money the City has already spent on new hires, the Draft Environmental Impact Statement, publicity, etc. come from our property taxes or from the GET funds? By the way, regardless of the source, exactly how much has already been spent on this rail project? Where are the past and current budgets? The citizens are entitled to this information and, God knows, the Council is. We need a complete and up-to-date accounting before the Council can even consider appropriating more. The job of the Council is to ensure wise use of taxpayer money, not to keep giving Administration more blank checks.

Last week, the Advertiser headline on the front page said property taxes will rise. This without any of the added costs of rail construction and maintenance, which are projected to be higher than for any city of comparable size. Maintenance costs have largely been glossed over by the City, which has maintained that passenger fares will be comparable to present bus fares. But maintaining elevated stations with their elevators and escalators will not be comparable to current bus maintenance costs.

Now to the matter of the unresolved issues relating to the project itself. Major issues identified and the source of most DEIS comments include elevated rail vs. street level, steel on steel system vs. lighter cheaper alternatives, and questions about the route including evicting the residents of the Banana Patch to build a parking lot.

The visual blight of elevated rail is a major issue raised by American Institute of Architecture among many others, including the League of Women Voters. Our major industry of tourism should also be concerned. What has Hawaii to offer that is greater than beauty?

Lighter cheaper alternatives include an improved bus system, which was given short shrift in the totally inadequate Alternatives Analysis. Evicting generations of residents for a parking lot, as is proposed for the Banana Patch, hardly appears to be good planning.

The League has called for a Supplemental Environmental Impact Statement to address the many questions left unanswered by the DEIS. Appropriating our tax money, no matter what the source, seems entirely premature at this time.

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