

Aloha-

I am a late arrival to the AIA Task Force on Transit, and for that matter to the entire debate centered on Honolulu's current rail transit proposal. To be honest, in the roughly 30 months I have lived in Honolulu, I have only invested 'pockets' of energy into considering the rail at all, and most of this consideration focused on whether or not the investment was the best and most appropriate use of government spending for the people of Oahu. While this question still persists, I did come to support rail under the mindset that doing something was better than doing nothing at all. So I went on not-thinking about rail again. I remained unengaged in the debate until last Fall while teaching a fifth-year design studio at the UH School of Architecture. I asked my students to consider redevelopment proposals for under-utilized conditions in Honolulu including Ala Wai Boat Harbor, Fort Street Mall, and a 20-acre area in Kakaako directly across Kapiolani from the Honolulu Design Center. During the course of the students' research efforts we learned that the rail alignment proposed to do the following:

A. Place an elevated line and station between Fort Street Mall and Aloha Tower.

As many of us have adequately noted, we are spending millions of dollars to effectively do what every other waterfront city in the US has worked to avoid; visually cut-off downtown from the waterfront. While I am certain that it is possible to design an elevated system that thoughtfully mitigates this visual impact, I have little confidence that our system will be the one to accomplish this. And even if the elevated proposal is of an exemplary design solution, the question would still remain as to why it is necessary to separate pedestrians from the ground plane in this instance.

B. Introduce an elevated rail, diagonal segment at the Kakaako District Ewa of Piikoi which begins to climb from 40' to nearly 100' at Nordstroms.

Roller-Coaster was the first image that came to mind. However, the larger question had to do with whether this alignment was seriously attempting to activate the future redevelopment potential of Kakaako's unique characteristics. To me it underlined the fact that the rail alignment is 'passing through' Kakaako rather than engaging the communities that already live there and will come to live here in the future. Quite frankly, all of the Kakaako alignment is in the wrong place and at the wrong elevation.

C. How do we get to Waikiki?

Finally, as we considered the area surrounding Ala Wai Boat Harbor, we learned of the rail's plan to connect the Airport to Nordstroms. Even the projection of the Waikiki Spur seems sadly incidental. Here is an opportunity to connect our main point of entry, the airport, with our main destination, Waikiki. I guess we'll get there, but will have to stop at Nordstroms first. In any case, the investment in rail absolutely has the potential to revitalize key attributes and underutilized conditions in our Primary Urban Core. However, in the current plan, most of the relationships articulated between community and transit appear to be treated as incidental and/or undesirable.

So I came to ask myself the obvious question that all of you have already asked, 'Why isn't this thing at grade when it comes into Honolulu?'. To me, it is absolutely the right solution for our city. It is not so much a question of available land area, or traveling 20mph vs 30mph along the 2.0 + mile stretch within the city. It is a question of actively engaging our existing and dynamic pedestrian experience of the city with transit options at that level of this experience; grade. It cannot be overemphasized that experiencing our city 'through-it' versus 'above-it' carry two entirely different understandings of our community. The latter places additional emphasis on our already well established destination nodes and economic engines. The former continues to tie these destinations to one another, but also allows the areas in-between to prosper.

I've spent some time since the release of the AIA Chapter Transit Video trying to get up-to-speed on the issues at the table and become familiar with the position and purpose of the task force. To this end, I would like to both share some observations I have made and pose a handful of questions for further consideration and feedback. This runs the risk of becoming an overly lengthy e-mail message, but to those who can afford the time to read and respond, I do look forward to your comments and clarifications.

ISSUE 01 - PURPOSE OF RAIL AND TASK FORCE

Clarity of purpose should define clarity of position statements. In order to better understand the purpose of the task force, I suggest that it is important to clarify our understanding of the purpose of the rail project. Is this San Francisco's Bart or Muni System, or both on the same alignment. Bart has about 4-5 stops in San Francisco proper, and three of these are within a half-mile of one another. Muni has dozens of stops. The purpose of BART is to connect the outlying communities of the region (often with competitive housing prices) to San Francisco as the economic center of the region. Muni connects the more immediate neighborhoods defining the city to one-another and to downtown at a substantially slower speed.

Is Honolulu Transit primarily a Point A to Point B system to get individuals from Kapolei as our second city to Honolulu? If yes, one might argue that we need fewer stops and more emphasis on our already extensive bus system.

ISSUE 02 - PURPOSE OF EIS

I have to say that I really do not like the idea of building a system as complex as a rail transit line on the heels of completing the EIS process. By its very nature, an EIS should not facilitate ongoing design of a system as complex as this one. I believe the process is intended to be utilized as a full-disclosure document to seek meaningful and valuable information and resources in the attempt to minimize impacts and optimize benefits. How can the system continue to be designed while we are still in the process of assessing the impacts? How can anyone reasonably argue that it is too late to raise any issue related to environmental impacts while the EIS process is ongoing?

I think we all know that properly planned endeavors are less likely to encounter delays than those planned in haste. I have no interest in slowing down any form of progress, but I do know that if the planning of the transit line had been properly handled through an extensive exercise involving a broad collaboration of disciplines in the very conception of the system, then many of the delays that are facing the DTS and the City could have already been addressed and avoided. I worked on a two-story retail core and shell project in Waikiki in which the ownership was required to invest 1% of the construction costs to completing an Environmental Assessment. This translated to a \$150,000.00 price tag to demonstrate that a two-story retail complex in a context of two-story retail complexes would not produce a significant impact to the environment. Even considering an economy of scale, I would expect the city to invest somewhere in the range of 1/4 of one percent of project cost into the conceptual planning, design, and EIS analysis of the transit proposal. 1/4% of 6 billion is 15 million dollars. Outside of the PB report, a nominal fee to the five person expert panel, and the salaries of city council members and the DTS, I cannot find where this initial investment is. I believe that if a \$15 mil budget could have been established for research, design, and preparation of the DEIS, Honolulu could be currently proposing one of the the most progressive and relevant transportation plans in the country.

ISSUE 03 - ALIGNMENT

The main point here is that as designers, we need to visualize and qualify any alternatives that we are proposing. If we do not agree with the alignment, what are we proposing? I am not sure I can get behind the Hotel Street to Richards Street to Queen Street to Kapiolani Street idea? This is because that no matter how much I desire the rail to be at -grade, I still believe it needs to run effectively as a destination oriented line. If our suggestion for an alternative alignment is not a clear improvement over the decisions that have been made, then we have no viability.

I have looked at some (self defined) alignment options, and the one I like the most involves coming to grade along Nimitz at, before, or just after the Iwilei station. It then stays along Nimitz and Ala Moana all the way to Atkinson where it moves mauka to the Convention Center and Kapiolani. It continues down Kapiolani until University and then heads mauka to UH. In the future a single direction rail segment can be added to both King and Beretania to tie the downtown area directly to UH activating more light rail use in the city center. If this addition never happens then the bus routes down King and Beretania remain as effective links to the rail system. This proposal also suggests leaving Waikiki alone to continue to use bus and shuttle feeder lines for service.

Ala Moana Boulevard avoids many of the concerns over ROW width, mauka to makai crossings, and land acquisition. However, I understand the State may not permit its use as a rail corridor. If the State and the City cannot agree on rail then this should already raise significant red flags.

ISSUE 04 - TRANSPORTATION PLANNING

This is an underlying issue in all of the above. Where are the consultant transportation planners in all of this? Has the City really addressed planning in a robust enough manner? Based on the letter I read from the Mayor to Peter Vincent, I would argue no. In that letter, the Mayor accused the AIA on multiple occasions of being late to the party. And this was in January of 2007! It appears you were late before you even had the opportunity to comment. If proper planning had been an objective of the administration, then we should not have had to invite ourselves to the discussion. As recognized stewards of the built environment, Community Planners, Urban Designers, and Architects should have been invited to participate from the word go.

I believe an RFQ/RFP should have been issued to address the planning exercise I referred to in Issue 02. Please keep in mind that it is most definitely not too late for the City to incorporate revised strategies to provide a system that is truly in the best interest of our community development and planning.

ISSUE 05 - MUD-SLINGING

I do not believe the AIA is guilty of this, but still, we should be careful to avoid mud-slinging. I have noticed both the Administration and the DTS frequently using phrases like 'too late', and calling Councilman Bainum 'wishy-washy'. Even the host of the AIA event in mid-April (Howzit Howard) has made some pretty inflammatory comments related to the AIA's position

and presentation. As far as I know, none of us are running for public office, so I suggest that our most effective strategy will be to demonstrate a viable and perhaps indisputable alternative. An alternative that addresses the concerns of the multitude of organizations and individuals who have issue with the current elevated alignment.

ISSUE 06 - SCHEDULE

Rail is obviously a moving target. I'm sure we all appreciate that the City feels that they have a good plan and desire to move forward. Our purpose is to demonstrate that a better alternative exists. Not the possibility of a better alternative, but an actual better alternative. It seems to me that our University of Hawaii programs in concert with other transportation planning and TOD programs at other Universities may be the best vehicle to conduct a study of alternatives. I feel that if we are unable to take advantage of a relatively short window to do this, then we will have to redefine our purpose to making the best of the current proposal.

Of course the city needs to immediately recognize that any technology that *limits* future options for Honolulu is not an acceptable plan for moving forward.

Thank you for taking the time to read this.
Any of your comments are welcome!

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