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Cachola Loses; Rail Going To Airport

By Andrew Pereira

Story Updated: Jan 28, 2009 at 9:27 PM HST

STORY SUMMARY>>>

For over an hour Honolulu City Councilman Romy Cachola tried to convince his colleagues that a route through Salt Lake Boulevard for Oahu's elevated train system made much more fiscal sense.

Ultimately the Council rejected Cachola's arguments, voting 6-2 to send the mass transit system past Honolulu International Airport.

The route switch will cost an additional \$226 million, according to the city's Draft Environmental Impact Statement. Cachola hung his hopes on the sour state of the economy in order to keep the route through the main hub of his district.

"The more money that we are adding to the alignment will translate into an increased burden on the part of our taxpayers," said the councilman. An amendment introduced by Cachola requiring the Council to pick the most cost effective route was eventually voted down.

In testimony Wayne Yoshioka, the director of the city's Department of Transportation Services, said the airport route would be more conducive to transit oriented development and according to the DEIS, result in 8,000 more boardings per day.

"The number of boardings for the Salt Lake alternative is 87,570 per day," said Yoshioka. "The airport's is 95,310 boardings per day; approximately close to an eight thousand difference."

Yoshioka said the city would now look at its options for coming up with the additional funds needed to build the airport route, which includes four rail stations compared to only two for the Salt Lake alternative. One of the options being considered is petitioning the Federal Transit Administration for more money.

"Now we know that the Council has decided to do that shift, we'll look at the appropriate way to try to address that," said Yoshioka. So far the city's half percent transit tax has raised \$331 million, with ten percent going to the state to cover administrative costs.

The only councilmember who supported Cachola was Duke Bainum, who replaced failed Honolulu mayoral candidate Ann Kobayashi.

"The people voted back in November for a route assuming that Salt Lake was on the route and that turned out not to be the case," said Bainum. "If this (resolution) passes today...somehow that just doesn't seem fair."

Cachola added to Bainum's comments, saying Salt Lake residents had been promised a widening project for Salt

Lake Boulevard in conjunction with the elevated rail line.

"We promised them \$30 million for a road widening (and) nothing happened. They voted in support of rail believing the alignment goes to Salt Lake."

Changing the rail line's route toward the airport was a major victory for Councilmen Todd Apo and Charles Djou, who sponsored the measure.

"If Honolulu does rail," said Djou, "we must do it right. Switching the rail route from Salt Lake Boulevard to the airport and Pearl Harbor is the first of several steps needed to correct numerous problems with the proposed Honolulu rail system."

The DEIS estimates the total cost of the rail project in 2008 dollars, including the airport segment, at \$4.5 billion.

During Wednesday's hearing the Council did not address another proposed route change suggested by U.S. District Judge Helen Gillmor. In a letter to council members, Gillmor wrote that the current route through Halekauwila Street next to the Prince Kuhio Federal Building should be moved due to security concerns.

The judge said the elevated rail line would be on the same level as the chambers for three judges, which could be targeted by terrorists.


Yoshioka said a transit security committee is reviewing all of the safety concerns along the proposed 20-mile route, but that changing the fixed guideway away from Halekauwila Street would likely not be required.

"We're taking this very seriously; we're taking a very close look at it," said Yoshioka. "Right now we believe most of the concerns can be addressed without having to move the route."

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