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Effort to change rail route advances

City Council favors airport station over Salt Lake by 7-1 vote

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The City Council yesterday took its first official step toward changing the route of Honolulu's train to include Honolulu International Airport.

The council voted 7-1 to advance a measure to divert the route away from suburban Salt Lake and into the industrial airport district. The change increases the project's cost by about \$220 million to \$4.5 billion. Councilman Romy Cachola, who represents Salt Lake, opposed the measure. Councilwoman Barbara Marshall did not attend yesterday morning's meeting.

The council is expected to vote on the matter several more times, with the next public hearing likely occurring next Thursday.

Changing the route would break a commitment by the city to the Salt Lake community, which successfully lobbied for the current train route in early 2007. That's when Cachola cast a swing vote to keep the rail project alive, if it went through Salt Lake rather than the airport.

The city's recently released draft environmental impact study shows that a Salt Lake route is convenient for more people, but by 2030 would generate lower ridership than an airport route.

Proponents for the Salt Lake route contend that alternative is cheaper and will serve more people, sooner than an airport route that doesn't connect to Waikiki. The city plans to someday connect the train to Waikiki, though there is no financial plan or timetable for building a Waikiki spur.

Cachola said the train will generate higher ridership by serving the Salt Lake area's 60,000 residents, rather than serving the airport-area's 15,000 workers. The higher the train's ridership, the less taxpayer subsidies will be needed to finance its operations.

"Salt Lake Boulevard is far superior to the airport," Cachola said during yesterday's hearing. "We can always do (an airport spur) later when we connect the route to Waikiki."

The city plans to start work on the rail line in late 2009. Limited service between West Loch and Waipahu would start in late 2013, and full service from East Kapolei to Ala Moana would begin by the end of 2018. Although the current plan is to route the train to Salt Lake, the airport route remains more popular for many in the broader community. That support now is being reflected in the council, which now appears to have the five votes needed to change the route to the airport.

At one time Cachola held the swing vote on rail. However, following last week's narrow victory on the rail ballot issue, Councilman Charles Djou switched his vote to support rail. Djou favors an airport route.

"The question before us is no longer should we do rail but how," said Djou, who opposed rail prior to last week's rail referendum. "The first step to doing it right is to connect the airport with Pearl Harbor."

Mayor Mufi Hannemann favors an airport route, but compromised to win Cachola's support for rail. Hannemann has supported the renewed debate over the train's route, but has not taken a position on the bill passed yesterday.

Additional Facts

To comment

People wishing to submit written testimony on Bill 64 can fax their testimony to 768-3826 or go to www.honolulu.gov/council/emailccl.htm to e-mail their testimony to the city.
