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Now it's time to focus on getting rail right

By Charles K. Djou

I have long argued that a multi-billion-dollar rail system for O'ahu is far too expensive and beyond what our local families can afford. Indeed, last week's vote on rail showed that nearly half of O'ahu's voters shared at least some of my concerns.

Nevertheless, while I disagree with the decision to move forward with rail, the voters have spoken in narrow support of this issue, and it is now my responsibility as a councilmember to ensure that the money spent on rail is expended as cost effectively as possible, so that we do not end up with a rail system that no one rides.

The close vote on rail reflects our community's clear divide over the wisdom of a rail system for Honolulu. If we want to bridge this divide, we must make sure that the city implements the rail project in the best way possible. One of the first steps to making sure that things are done right is to connect the airport and Pearl Harbor to the rail system.

The city's handling of the rail project thus far leaves much to be desired and much that needs correction. The exclusion of the Honolulu International Airport in favor of Salt Lake Boulevard was a significant error on the part of the city, which was the result of a deal by the administration and the councilmember from Salt Lake to secure the votes needed on the City Council to go forward with rail.

Every major American city that proceeded with a rail system has connected its airport to the rail line. In Honolulu, tourism is the largest sector of our economy. Except for a handful of cruise-ship passengers, every tourist who comes to Hawai'i comes to us via the airport. Every rail study conducted in every major city, including Ho-nolulu's, concluded that connecting the municipal airport makes sense. This makes it all that much more important to connect Honolulu International Airport to the rail system.

Furthermore, the second-largest sector of our local economy is defense. The Pearl Harbor and Hickam Air Force Base area is one of the largest job centers in our state — not just for military service members, but for local civilian employees as well. If we are going to go forward with a rail system, it makes sense to connect this major employment center to the rail system.

Along with Councilmember Todd Apo, I introduced legislation that would make connecting the airport and Pearl Harbor a priority in the building of a Ho-nolulu rail system. This is an important measure that makes doing rail a little more sensible.

My proposal to connect the airport and Pearl Harbor, however, does not mean that Salt Lake Boulevard will never be connected to the rail system. Rather, it changes the construction priority. Salt Lake Boulevard still remains a part of the master-planned rail system for construction. The airport and Pearl Harbor area, however, will just be connected first in rail's initial operating segment.

I was not one of the 51 percent of the voters who went to the polls and voted for a rail system, but I respect our democratic process, and will focus on addressing the weaknesses in the rail project so that

we end up with a rail system that actually serves our community's needs.

One of the major mistakes the city has made in designing the proposed rail system is to opt for a route that goes down Salt Lake Boulevard instead of connecting the airport and Pearl Harbor. We need to correct this mistake now before we start preliminary engineering at the beginning of next year.

We need to correct this and other mistakes made with the city's rail planning, to bring those, like me, who opposed rail, to at least respect the decision to do rail even if we don't like it.

Honolulu City Councilman Charles K. Djou represents District 4. He wrote this commentary for The Advertiser.
