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Finding Solutions to Oahu's Traffic Gridlock

BY MALIA ZIMMERMAN

Hawaii, and in particular the island of Oahu where the majority of residents live, has been a battleground for mass transit advocates and opponents over the last 30 years. The fight over the best alternatives to traffic congestion has intensified as the state's population has swollen to 1.2 million, with more than 800,000 people residing on Oahu, the majority of whom prefer to commute by automobile, the more personalized, convenient and flexible transit option. With more commuters driving to and from work, dropping their children at school and other activities, traffic has naturally become more congested, particularly on Oahu's freeways during the morning and afternoon drives times.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Advocates and opponents of fixed rail and mass transit have passionately fought for the last 30 years over the best alternatives to traffic congestion. From the government's perspective, the debate, studies and taxpayer dollars have been focused away from making the average driver's ride easier, and more free flowing and faster, and to accommodating the less than 10 percent minority that commute by Oahu's only monopoly mass transit alternative, TheBus. However, with more than 800,000 people residing on Oahu, the majority of whom prefer to commute by automobile, free marketers say elected officials and government bureaucrats making major decisions that affect Oahu's commuters should focus instead on simple, most cost effective, free-market traffic solutions.

Honolulu Mayor Jeremy Harris in 1997 decided to expand the city's transportation service by building an exclusive lane Bus Rapid Transit System, at a cost of \$1 billion, and millions of dollars more to maintain and operate, despite tremendous opposition from the business and

residential communities. Though the plan is in its first phase and is still yet to be approved by the Federal Transit Authority, the mayor did convince the 2002 Honolulu City Council to fund \$31 million of the BRT's first phase, and is expecting another \$20 million from the federal government. But opponents continue to fight the project arguing construction costs are too high for what the BRT will deliver; it will take away exclusive lanes in Honolulu where traffic already is backlogged; and it will undermine private businesses.

Republican Gov. Linda Lingle, elected in 2002, formed a traffic taskforce in July 2003, but only included government bureaucrats and politicians from the local and federal government in her planning group. Private transportation operators and the public were purposefully kept from attending the series of planning meetings, and at the end of seven planning sessions in October 2003, the group announced taxpayers would fund two projects in addition to the BRT: a "flyover" and a fixed rail system.

The “Nimitz Flyover,” or two-lane reversible highway that diverts traffic from one of the busiest intersections in Honolulu’s industrial area to downtown Honolulu, will be built by the state in four years at a cost of \$200 million with 80 percent funding from the federal government. The fixed rail system will be built by the city, from West Oahu to Honolulu, at a cost of \$2.6 billion to construct, with 50 percent or less funding from the federal government, and be built in 14 years after a four-year environmental inspection process.

To fund the fixed rail, Gov. Lingle says she will facilitate a tax increase by passing a law to allow counties to tax residents and visitors up to 1 percent sales tax -- a new sales tax for Hawaii residents. Lingle also says other taxes may be raised to fund the rail, including the gasoline tax (already the highest in the nation) and the

General Excise Tax (the only one of its kind in the nation). Opposition is quickly mounting to the fixed rail project, however, especially because of the cost and the tax increase the governor says the public must accept, despite the fact that Hawaii residents already are burdened with the fourth highest overall tax burden in the nation.

Private transportation operators who have fought the BRT, are also, for the most part, fighting the construction of the fixed rail system, and asking the city and state to instead be more supportive and less restrictive over private industry so transportation companies can compete with TheBus. Currently Oahu’s only legal “public” transportation system, TheBus, is a passenger bus system funded

primarily by Oahu’s taxpayers who subsidize approximately 80 percent of the ridership cost for the 8 percent of the commuters who choose this transit option. TheBus, operated and managed by a private company, Oahu Transit Service (OTS), has an exclusive contract with the City and County of Honolulu.

Transportation expert Cliff Slater, who headed the effort to defeat Hawaii’s fixed rail proposal in 1992, says the current rail proposal will not alleviate traffic and will not get the ridership to justify the cost and the subsidies. He says cities with rail see traffic get worse, not better, possibly because cities invest transportation funds into the rail system for only a small percentage of the population, while cities that do not invest in rail and who build and expand their roads, improve traffic flow.

The Grassroot Institute of Hawaii consulted with a number of transportation experts who maintain there are more cost-efficient and effective solutions to Hawaii’s traffic problems than what is being or has been proposed by the city -- the Bus Rapid Transit or fixed rail. If these experts’ recommendations are implemented on Oahu, traffic flow, congestion and pollution from automobiles stuck in traffic will be reduced considerably, and citizens will save time, money and lessen the wear and tear on their automobiles. Some suggestions are to create reversible HOV lanes; add HOT lane option to HOV Lanes; build alternative, reversible routes in major traffic areas; allow private industry to compete; allow private services for people with special needs; ask governor to establish traffic taskforce with private-only transporters.

FOR MORE DETAIL, SEE THE FULL REPORT THAT FOLLOWS

Free market advocates and transportation experts agree Oahu traffic has increased because there are more drivers on the roads. But there is another reason - the state and county governments have stunted private competition to the city’s monopoly bus service – TheBus – and left commuters with few alternatives other than driving, carpooling or taking the city’s bus service. Most have opted to drive, as they need more flexibility than other systems afford them.

GOVERNMENT ATTEMPTS TO ALLEVIATE TRAFFIC WITH MORE TAXPAYER SUBSIDIZED MONOPOLIES

Honolulu Mayor Jeremy Harris decided in 1997 to expand the city’s transportation service and build an exclusive lane Bus Rapid Transit System. Though the plan is in its first phase and is still yet to be approved by the Federal Transit Authority, the mayor did convince the 2002 Honolulu City Council to fund \$31 million of the BRT’s first phase, and is expecting another \$20 million from the federal government.

The project has met with tremendous public resistance for three primary reasons: construction costs are expected to exceed \$1 billion; it will take away exclusive lanes in Honolulu where traffic already is backlogged; and it will undermine private businesses.

Republican Gov. Linda Lingle, elected in 2002, formed a traffic taskforce in July 2003, but only included government bureaucrats and politicians in her planning group – private transportation operators were intentionally kept off the taskforce and the public was purposefully kept from attending the series of planning meetings.

At the end of seven planning sessions in October 2003, the group, which included state, city and federal politicians, announced taxpayers would fund two projects they conceived.

The first is the “Nimitz Flyover,” a two-lane reversible highway that diverts traffic from one of the busiest intersections in Honolulu’s industrial area to downtown Honolulu. The Nimitz Flyover is to be built by the state in four years at a cost of \$200 million with 80 percent funding from the federal government.

The second is a fixed rail system to be built by the city in sections, starting from Kapolei and eventually spreading across Honolulu at a cost of \$2.6 billion to construct (phase 1), with 50 percent or less funding coming from the federal government. The project could take up to four years to approve and get through the environmental impact (EIS) stage and another 14 years or more to build.

In order to fund the fixed rail, Gov. Lingle says she is willing to break her “No New Tax” pledge that she signed before being elected to her first term in 2002. Gov. Lingle says she must create a mechanism for the city to raise taxes by either establishing a new sales tax or facilitating the increase of existing taxes. Examples of potential tax increases she cited were the gasoline tax (already the highest in the nation) and the General Excise Tax (the only one of its kind in the nation). Opposition is quickly mounting to the fixed rail project, however, especially because of the cost and the tax increase the governor says the public must accept, despite the fact that Hawaii residents already are burdened with the fourth highest overall tax burden in the nation.

Though no group, with the exception of the environmentalists, have opposed the Nimitz Flyover, private transportation operators and many taxpayers were outraged by the announcement of the proposed fixed rail and tax increase. Private operators continue to question why the governor did not include them in her taskforce or keep in mind another promise she made, which was to make Hawaii with its worst business-friendly rating in the nation, “open for business” and more amenable to business.

The governor emphasizes the tax increases and light rail will be built by the city, and are simply “facilitated” by her.

GOVERNMENT STUNTS FREE-MARKET SOLUTIONS TO TRAFFIC

Currently Oahu’s only legal “public” transportation system, TheBus, is a passenger bus system funded primarily by Oahu’s taxpayers who subsidize approximately 80 percent of the ridership cost for the 8 percent of the commuters who choose this transit option. TheBus, operated and managed by a private company, Oahu Transit Service (OTS), has an

exclusive contract with the City and County of Honolulu. OTS handles the payroll, benefits, hiring, firing and union salary negotiations relating to TheBus operations. The city, which maintains a heavy hand on OTS, oversees scheduling, frequency, routes, and with the approval of the Honolulu City Council, sets passenger fees. Currently, a standard ride on TheBus costs \$2, with monthly passes sold at various rates to seniors, students, disabled and the general public.

GOVERNMENT UNDERMINES PRIVATE OPERATORS: UNDERCUTS BUSINESS WITH SUBSIDIES, TAXPAYER FUNDS; OVER-REGULATES INDUSTRY

Another challenge to private operators – the city competes with private transportation businesses. Private transportation operators are limited in what they can offer their customers, while the city’s TheBus service continuously and aggressively competes against them. Transportation operators who cater to visitors to Oahu cite as one example the city’s TheBus, which takes on Bus No. 22, passengers from Waikiki, Hawaii’s most dense visitor destination, to Hanauma Bay Preserve, one of Oahu’s premiere attractions. The cost for this 30-minute ride, whether for visitors or residents (around 90 to 95 percent of riders are tourists), is \$2, a fee that is heavily subsidized by taxpayers. Besides being able to offer a lower fee to riders because of the heavy subsidy, TheBus No. 22 is given exclusive access to Hanauma Bay’s preserve, while private operators must remain outside and ask their passengers to hike a considerable distance into the preserve. Thanks to the city, the incentive for visitors is to take the TheBus, which undercuts the visitor industry operators.

In addition to targeting tourists on that one route, the city’s TheBus continues to market aggressively to both west bound (U.S. mainland and Canada) and east bound visitors (Asia), using elaborate glossy guides to routes published in both English and Japanese. TheBus even offers subsidized trips around the island for just \$2. The city also competes with private operators by chartering buses to deliver passengers to and from special events, such as University of Hawaii football games, a practice bus operators maintain is illegal according to federal law.

As if the city’s monopoly bus service and anti-competitive tactics against business wasn’t difficult enough for private operators to overcome, burdensome rules and regulations and high fees imposed by state and county government also add to the challenge. Elected officials have so over-regulated the transportation industry over the last several decades, through the state Public Utilities Commission and state laws and county ordinances, that operating a transportation business has become difficult and virtually not profitable.

With these kinds of prohibitive barriers to transportation solutions, and more subsidized competition being built in the form of a BRT and light rail, traffic experts in Hawaii say the traffic that continues to build on Oahu’s freeways is no mystery.

PEOPLE WANT PERSONALIZED SERVICE AS EVIDENCED BY DECLINES IN CARPOOLING, BUS RIDERSHIP

According to the 2000 U.S. Census, there are 412,000 people in Hawaii who commute on Oahu, including 235,000 who drive alone.

The mom who drops her children at school in the morning, goes to work, leaves work to run errands at lunch, picks up children from school after work and then drives them to after school activities before going home, needs a mode of transportation that affords her flexibility. In Hawaii, the only option for this mom, and in fact many parents, is an automobile.

Of course, some commuters on Oahu have their transportation needs met by TheBus. According to U.S. Census 2000 figures, TheBus carries 34,000 commuters a day, not all during rush hour (traffic experts say this figure is overstated). According to recent media reports and the city’s Department of Transportation, this figure is currently down 15 percent.

Another alternative for Oahu’s commuters is to carpool, with around 80,000 commuters opting for this method. Vanpools work for a small segment of the commuter base in Hawaii. Despite the carpooling concept being heavily promoted through government-funded advertising

Table 18.27-- BUS FARE CHRONOLOGY, FOR OAHU: 1971 TO 2003 [In dollars]

Effective date	One-way cash fare (Adult/Youth)	Monthly pass (Adult/ Youth)
March 1, 1971	0.25 / 0.15	
March 2, 1971	0.25 / 0.10	
June 9, 1972	0.25 / 0.50, 0.10, 0.25	
March 15, 1974	0.25 / 0.10	
November 1, 1979	0.50 / 0.25	15.00 / 7.50
June 18, 1984	0.60 / 0.25	15.00 / 7.50
October 1, 1993	0.85 / 0.25	20.00 / 7.50
July 1, 1995	1.00 / 0.50	25.00 / 12.50
July 1, 2001	1.50 / 0.75	27.00 / 13.50
July 1, 2003	1.75 / 0.75	30.00 / 13.50
October 1, 2003	2.00 / 1.00	40.00 / 20.00

- 1) There have been special fares for senior citizens, persons with a disability, service to and from Pearl Harbor, and the Stadium Express during many of these years.
- 2) In addition, there have been special passes for senior citizens and persons with a disability.
- 3) Zone fares were initiated and later eliminated.
- 4) Most recent change (See Oct. 1, 2003): Annual pass: adult (\$440.00), youth (\$220.00), senior citizen or person with a disability (\$30.00).

**Source: City and County of Honolulu, Honolulu Public Transit Authority, records; Department of Transportation Services, records <http://www.thebus.org/Fare/Fare.asp> accessed October 2, 2003.*

Private operators cannot open a competing business to TheBus. In fact, jitneys - fast buses with 8 to 25 passengers - once legal and flourishing as an industry in Hawaii were made illegal in 1940. The Hawaii court determined this alternative form of transportation offered by the Rosecrans Company, among others, unfairly competed with and took passengers from the monopoly bus service, Honolulu Rapid Transit Co. Private developer Harry Weinberg, who in the 1960s bought Honolulu Transit Co., learned the hard way government could turn quickly on private business, even business previously favored. In 1971 and 1972, then Mayor Frank Fasi seized the Honolulu Rapid Transit Co. so the City & County of Honolulu could run the monopoly service. To this day, the City & County runs the exclusive bus service now referred to as TheBus.

Taxi cab companies also face extensive and complex regulations that prevent them from legally providing many services they want to offer to the public, including a fair way to give passengers the chance to ride share. Taxi customers who share rides with other passengers must pay for the entire ride as they exit the vehicle, usually resulting in the first customer departing from the taxi paying the majority of the fare. Also cab companies are not allowed to offer flat rates to customers, so that they can, for example, pay for rides in advance for children they have picked up from school or elderly relatives they have picked up and then dropped home from the doctor. Cab companies are severely limited by the city sign ordinance, which mandates they keep a dome on the taxi, even if the customer requests it be taken off so their commute is more discreet. The ordinance also prevents operators from advertising a specific service they might offer, such as “Medicab,” where drivers in conjunction with Hawaii’s medical facilities, offer a customer-service intensive pick-up and drop off system for elderly patients needing medical care.

campaigns and a subsidized “Vanpool” program, the number of commuters opting to carpool in the state is following the national trend and declining. Traffic experts say this is probably because the cost to ride in a vanpool is \$85 per month, whereas riding TheBus is around \$40 per month. TheBus, of course, is heavily subsidized, and so experts say if vanpools were further subsidized and TheBus was less subsidized, making the price to the consumer more even, that more people would opt to take the vanpool or carpool over TheBus.

Finally, the 2000 U.S. Census shows around 34,000 people either walk to work or work at home, while 9,000 people use other means of transportation such as bicycles or motorcycles.

MASS TRANSIT: TRIED, BLOCKED IN HAWAII

The city administration once before in the late 1980s and early 1990s, headed by then Mayor Frank Fasi and Fasi’s Managing Director Jeremy Harris, moved to create a second monopoly transportation system – a fixed rail. Fasi and Harris pushed the fixed rail system that would transport riders 15.9 miles from Leeward Community College to the University of Hawaii’s Manoa Campus, and maintained this fixed rail would considerably lighten the traffic coming from the west end of the island.

For this short distance, which did not even extend close to the new “second city of Kapolei” in West Oahu where many Oahu residents were moving, taxpayers would be faced with a \$2 billion total bill, plus millions more in government expenditures to operate and maintain the fixed rail. The route is similar to the one being proposed now by the Lingle traffic taskforce.

Also similar to the current plan is the funding mechanism, which ultimately boils down to the taxpayers. To fund it, the city proposed a 12.5 percent tax increase in the state’s 4 percent General Excise Tax, an increase not received well by Hawaii taxpayers who already had and still have the fourth highest overall tax burden in the nation.

After a tremendous war in the press and in neighborhood board and community meetings, the majority of the public realized the fixed rail would be a costly flop and would not alleviate traffic and so pressured their city council members to vote the project down. The vote in October of 1992 in the 9-member Honolulu City Council was 5 to 4, in favor of killing fixed rail.

But that didn’t stop the city administration, now headed by Jeremy Harris, former managing director who was elected mayor of Honolulu in 1994, from attempting to establish another monopoly taxpayer funded transportation system. Just five years later in 1997, the Harris administration began its plan to establish an exclusive lane Bus Rapid Transit System by 2007. The BRT plan has two parts, the in-town and regional routes, with the entire project costing taxpayers \$1 billion to construct and millions more to subsidize, maintain and operate. The city is moving ahead with its plan, despite widespread protests by all of the major companies in Hawaii’s private transportation industry, all of the neighborhood boards with districts in the BRT route and many other citizens and groups.

Many of the newly elected council members also are opposed to the BRT plan, especially in tough fiscal times where the city’s budget is stretched just providing core services. But they are so far unable to undo the allocation of \$31 million that their predecessors in the Council, who are no longer in office, pushed through. Though they and many of their constituents continue to speak out against the proposal, the mayor presses on with his plan for the BRT.

Most of the people opposed to the mayor’s plan are concerned with the cost and design of the BRT, including its use of exclusive lanes thereby removing major traffic lanes on already busy roadways. One of Oahu’s busiest roads, Kapiolani Boulevard, will see its traffic capacity cut in half during peak traffic hours as two middle lanes will be dedicated to the BRT. The road has three lanes on each side, but reverses one of the middle lanes during traffic times. This no longer will be possible with the BRT, which will cut the traffic flow from four lanes to two.

Another major road in Honolulu’s industrial area, Dillingham Boulevard, will be cut from two lanes each way to one lane each way. Businesses in the area are extremely concerned with this plan – they say their customers will no longer be able to get to their stores because traffic capacity will be cut in half on this busy street. They also cite frequent construction on the street, and TheBus vehicles and delivery trucks that travel through that street, as making it virtually impossible to use it unless traveling on a BRT vehicle. Finally, Ala Moana Boulevard, another of Oahu’s most busy streets, will be cut from three lanes to two each way. Local traffic experts are concerned the downsizing on Kapiolani and Ala Moana Boulevards, two of the major exit and entryways to Honolulu, will have an extremely adverse affect on traffic flow.

Free-market advocates are concerned the city will further undermine private operators and even drive a number of to cut back considerably or close their operations all together, leading to employee layoffs and even fewer transportation alternatives for visitors and residents.

Other critics claim the BRT project is being used by the mayor to repay his political supporters, many of whom own consulting and construction companies. Between 199 and 2002, they contributed more than \$1.5 million to the mayor’s campaign -- half of the money he raised during that time period.

The state Campaign Spending Commission and the city prosecutor has been investigating Harris for more than two years for operating a “pay to play” system, meaning contractors make contributions to the mayor in order to get city consulting and construction contracts. Over 100 consultants and contracting companies have been investigated by the state Campaign Spending Commission, with the vast majority fined between \$500 and \$303,000 for illegally funneling money to the mayor. These companies also received millions from the city in contracts during this same period.

The city prosecutor and Honolulu Police Department have arrested a number of people on charges of money laundering and giving illegal contributions to the mayor, including one member of the mayor’s cabinet. They promise more arrests to come.

Those who say the BRT is all about repaying political supporters may have a smoking gun. Careful analysis of the money already spent on the BRT reveals 44 percent of the consultants hired by the city for the BRT project are being investigated or have been indicted or convicted for participating in the state’s notorious “pay to play system.” The percentage of consultants fined, arrested or convicted of making excessive or false name contributions to the mayor, is so stunning, some transportation experts say they believe the entire BRT project is not about social engineering, or getting people out of their automobiles, as it is about rewarding friends.

The “pay to play” system has reportedly extended to other city traffic-related construction projects.

An advocate of the “Smart Growth” concept, the mayor has added on several costly “traffic calming” measures to the city’s landscape. Those included a \$1.5 million project in Hawaii Kai that takes out two lanes on one of the busiest roadways, reducing the road from two lanes to one. Many residents complained they don’t want the roadway reduced in size, and even held a public protest, but the mayor, without the neighborhood board or community’s approval initiated the project in Sept 2003. The \$1.5 million contract to build the roadway was awarded to Royal Contracting, whose vice president Leonard Leong was arrested in September 2003 on a misdemeanor of making over the limit contributions to the mayor’s campaign. Leong, a police commissioner, recently resigned his post after tremendous public outcry and pressure from the media and his peers. Royal Contracting, one of the companies under investigation by the state Campaign Spending Commission for excessive and false name contributions, was fined \$20,000 for making excessive contributions to the mayor.

Besides high cost, these traffic-calming measures created a litany of additional problems. Roundabouts have created havoc for emergency vehicles. In Kailua, the city installed a traffic-calming strip down the middle of an already narrow residential road. On one part of the street there is a preschool, which is now fronted by a large blockade in the

middle of the road, making it impossible for fire trucks or other emergency vehicles to get through.

According to national reports, traffic calming measures are extremely dangerous for bicyclists, which is ironic because the mayor has used a substantial sum of city taxpayer funds to purchase television commercials on major networks encouraging commuters to bike -- not drive -- to work.

Evidence of a "pay to play" system is strong, whether it involves traffic calming projects, the BRT, or other city construction projects. But there is a clear vision articulated by the director of the city's Department of Transportation Services Cheryl Soon that cannot be ignored. She admits wanting to social engineer people from their cars and onto the BRT. That is because by taking away lanes and creating more traffic gridlock, people will supposedly throw up their hands and get on the BRT, thus boosting both ridership and federal subsidies for the project.

LESSONS FROM THEBUS SHUTDOWN DURING STRIKE

In September 2003, the week the majority of Hawaii's school children started their fall semester, TheBus drivers, who belong to the Teamsters Union, went on strike for higher pay and more benefits. The highest paid driver made \$68,000 a year, plus \$12,000 to \$24,000 in benefits, but drivers wanted more, even though there was a public outcry over what they are currently paid, especially when compared to unionized firefighters, police officers and teachers who make considerably less. Drivers also wanted to be guaranteed they'd keep their jobs, even though the city had cut back on TheBus routes.

Oahu Transit Service stood firm, stating the company could not afford to pay drivers more money unless the city raised ridership fees. So under pressure from the public to restore service, the mayor and Honolulu City Council agreed to raise fees. After three weeks, and a new contract with higher pay and more benefits and a guarantee, TheBus drivers went back to work, but 15 percent or more riders have so far not returned to TheBus. Traffic experts say the decrease in ridership is due to the increase in fares.

The strike provided a valuable lesson for Hawaii's transportation departments, political leaders and the public. Oahu's traffic started to flow more smoothly thanks in part to the state Department of Transportation opening its HOV lanes to all drivers, rather than just to automobiles with two or more passengers. The state Department of Transportation also opened the Zipper lane to two or more drivers, rather than its standard three or more drivers.

Hawaii's commuters saw the obvious clearly: more lanes, not fewer lanes, make traffic flow more smoothly and quickly. TheBus strike actually made the public realize the city's BRT plan to run on exclusive lanes, cutting off lanes from general traffic in several of Hawaii's major Honolulu thoroughfares, was not a way to make traffic flow quicker and more smoothly. TheBus strike actually made the public realize the city's BRT plan to use exclusive lanes, while cutting off lanes from general traffic on several of Hawaii's major Honolulu thoroughfares, is not the way to make traffic flow faster, but would only make traffic even more stagnant.

GOVERNMENT OFFICIALS STILL PUSHING FOR MASS TRANSIT, RATHER THAN PERSONALIZED TRANSIT ALTERNATIVES

Despite major public defeat, and lawsuits against the city that followed, those in favor of a government-run mass transit system still continue today to push for mass transit and fixed rail alternatives.

Those include many of Hawaii's Democrat lawmakers who chair influential committees in the Hawaii State Legislature, such as transportation and finance committees. Sen. Cal Kawamoto, D-Waipahu, a member of the governor's traffic taskforce, has headed up the

most recent effort in the state Legislature for fixed rail, introducing and getting passed legislation in 2003 to further study the issue.

Oddly, after Gov. Linda Lingle made the announcement about the \$2.6 billion light rail project, she flip-flopped on her support for the BRT. During the campaign for governor, she was opposed to the mayor's BRT. However, just 10 months after being elected, the governor changed her mind and said she is in favor of the BRT as long as it does not take away traffic lanes. She also claimed the fixed rail project and the BRT will connect in Iwilei, one of Oahu's industrial areas, so people can then get off the fixed rail and on to the BRT.

She may run into trouble with this plan however, because the mayor's current BRT plan takes away several lanes from Oahu's main roadways. Though the mayor and his transportation director deny this exclusive lane provision is part of Phase 1, and the governor is supporting on the basis that there is no exclusive lane use, the evidence to the contrary are in the city's own engineering drawings. In fact, there is a lawsuit about this very issue against the city that is attempting to stop the BRT.

Private transportation operators say they are upset with the BRT, the fixed rail and the fact that there is no transportation expert or private operators on the governor's taskforce. To counter this, the Grassroot Institute of Hawaii has recommended the governor form a second transportation taskforce made up of those in the private industry, and weigh those suggestions equally with those made by her government-only taskforce.

The governor so far has refused private transportation expertise, claiming private operators will have input in the future during the EIS process, which is expected to take four years.

Transportation expert Cliff Slater, who headed the effort to defeat Hawaii's fixed rail proposal in 1992, says the current rail proposal will not alleviate traffic. He says the rail will not get the ridership to justify the cost and the subsidies. He points to other cities as evidence, where cities with rail see traffic get worse, not better.

One theory is traffic congestion increases with fixed rail, because those cities put the majority of transportation funds into the rail system for only that small percentage of the population who ride. Cities that do not invest in rail and who build and expand their roads instead, improve traffic flow for the greater majority -- drivers.

PROPOSED SOLUTIONS TO HONOLULU'S TRAFFIC PROBLEMS

While the private market is undercut by the city subsidized monopoly bus system and harsh restrictions that limit competition and prevent viable free market transit alternatives from being established, big government advocates are pushing for more subsidized and monopolized transportation services. Ironically, they are using the traffic and lack of private alternatives to push fixed rail, light rail and an exclusive lane Bus Rapid Transit system.

However, virtually every case study shows commuters are moving toward more personalized transit.

The Grassroot Institute of Hawaii consulted with a number of transportation experts who maintain there are more cost-efficient and effective solutions to Hawaii's traffic problems than what is being or has been proposed by the city -- the Bus Rapid Transit or fixed rail.

If these recommendations are implemented on Oahu, these traffic experts maintain traffic flow, congestion and pollution from automobiles stuck in traffic, will be reduced considerably, and citizens will save time, money and lessen the wear and tear on their automobiles.

HERE IS A COMPILATION OF THEIR SUGGESTIONS:

Create Reversible HOV Lanes: Modify the center of the H-I Freeway to facilitate a reversible transitway or High Occupancy Vehicle (HOV) lanes. This would enable vehicles, such as vans and cars with three or

more passengers as well as private and city buses, to travel at uncongested freeway speeds.

Add HOT Lane Option to HOV Lanes: Allow automobiles with less than three commuters to travel in the HOV lane for a small fee, essentially converting the HOV to a High Occupancy/Toll (HOT) lane. Buses and vanpools would use the premium lanes free of charge, while other motorists would pay a variable toll. Tolls would be debited electronically from users' smart cards, doing away with tollbooths and cash transactions. The number of cars using the reserved lanes can be controlled through variable pricing (via electronic toll collection) so as to maintain free-flowing traffic at all times, even during the height of rush hours. According to the Reason Public Policy Institute, California's two HOT lane projects, which have been in operation for several years, have demonstrated convincingly the ability of electronic variable pricing to maintain congestion-free conditions even during peak hours. Moreover, surveys in California have shown widespread public acceptance of the HOT lane concept. People of all income levels use the HOT lanes when saving time is an important consideration. Indeed, utility vans and delivery trucks are a far more common sight on California's HOT lanes than the proverbial Lexus.

Build Alternative, Reversible Route in Major Traffic Area. Build a new two-lane grade-separated reversible elevated transitway between Waiawa and Downtown Honolulu. (Governor is proposing a variation of this idea).

Allow Private Industry to Compete. Honolulu's subsidized monopoly bus system is relatively successful and well maintained by a private contractor, Oahu Transit Service. But TheBus is not for everyone. Commuters who don't take TheBus say cars are more convenient, offer a shorter travel time, guaranteed seats, ensure there is no walking required, no transfers are needed and offer door-to-door service. To meet the needs of some commuters who travel by car, but would take a private service if their needs could be met and it was more financially viable for them, private operators could be brought in to complement TheBus services and subsidized equally with TheBus. The Hawaii private transit industry has approximately twice the carrying capacity of the city's TheBus, but is more flexible because the vehicles are smaller and more maneuverable. Local experts say fewer TheBus vehicles would be needed overall if private transporters were brought in during peak traffic times because TheBus fleet is approximately twice the size it needs to be during off-peak hours, but is kept large to accommodate ridership peaks in the morning and afternoon traffic times. With minimal flat subsidies and fees set by the operator, the private market could offer door-to-door service, guaranteed seats, higher quality transit, and faster transportation service than the city's TheBus, and therefore could complement the city service. Competition from other services would keep the fees low and the service efficient.

Offer Private Services for People with Special Needs. In conjunction with private operators, the city and state could offer paratransit services,

such as door to door services for elderly or handicapped with special transportation needs that would not be met without the private operators. One example is an elderly patient with Alzheimer's who needs to be taken from his home to his doctor's office and then returned home, with no one but the driver to help him.

Governor's Traffic Taskforce with Private Only Transporters. The governor formed a government-only taskforce to address the traffic problems and predictably the government officials came up with government-only solutions. To counter this, the Grassroot Institute recommends the governor form a taskforce of private citizens who have expertise or stake in the traffic situation in Hawaii. Thus, when both groups present their ideas to the governor and the public, there will be real alternatives, including some from the private sector that do not involve raising taxes or building another government-funded transportation monopoly.

THE NET EFFECT OF THESE ACTIONS WILL BE:

A greater increase in transit usage than the city forecasts for its rail plan.

A greater reduction in rush hour auto traffic than the city forecasts for its rail plan.

A much faster trip for those using multi-passenger vehicles on the congestion-free transitways than the city forecasts for its BRT or fixed rail.

Less taxpayer impact than the BRT or rail proposals.

More involvement by private transportation experts, stakeholders and members of the public.

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