

Commentary by Ian Lind
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I think Honolulu will benefit from rail transit.

But I've been puzzled why our city has so stubbornly refused to consider the alternative of light rail, a more flexible steel-wheel-on-steel-rail technology used in most of the cities that have built new rail systems over the past two decades.

Light rail is cheaper and quicker to build, more community and business friendly, and easier to integrate into urban neighborhoods. These trains can run on elevated tracks where it makes sense, but can also drop down to street level where more appropriate.

But the city never took a serious look at modern light rail. Instead, it dusted off its old plans based on 1980s technology choices and immediately put those on a fast track using all available political muscle.

It now seems the fix was in from the beginning.

The city spent millions, ostensibly to weigh public opinion, all the while keeping a hidden thumb on the scale to pre-determine the outcome. Public participation was reduced to commenting on the color schemes or roof designs for the pre-designed stations, while discussions the costs and benefits of competing rail technologies were put on a dead-end track. Professionals trying to offer suggestions were first told they should wait, then told they were too late. Technology decisions were made behind the scenes, then buried in complex specifications that quietly ruled out alternatives while politicians bragged about the open process.

Perhaps I'm naive in believing that we should be building the best, most efficient, and most appropriate transit system for Honolulu's needs.

Powerful business, labor, and political interests have made it clear that, for them, this really isn't about transportation or planning better communities. Instead, they say, it's all about money. Jobs. Power. And, of course, politics.

What looks to me like a steep cost of over \$5 billion taxpayer dollars is, on the other side of the ledger, more than \$5 billion in future income, wages, and profits.

Their message is clear and simple. Stop dithering about available alternatives. Aesthetics? Not important. Better design? The latest technology? Don't worry, this one's good enough. Get real. Get over it.

With \$5 billion at stake, getting between these special interests and that pot of gold is, politically speaking, a most dangerous spot.

I'll ride the train when it's finally built. But I'll remember that it should have been done differently, and could have been much better.