



Cliff Slater's SECOND OPINION

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Rail justification must be carefully analyzed

Parsons Brinckerhoff (PB) says they will be releasing the definitive 'Alternatives Analysis' this November.ⁱ The city council will then decide just one month later in December whether to choose rail transit or HOT lanesⁱⁱ as the "Locally Preferred Alternative."

Up to that time, they will feed us dribs and drabs about the features of the system but little about the benefits, which is to say, reductions in traffic congestion — if any.

PB did say last week that by the time the expenses are all in, total costs for a rail line would be north of \$4 billion. The Mayor said originally that the project would cost \$2.5 billion and that he would need a one percent increase in the General Excise tax to fund its construction. He had to settle for half of one a percent.

So it begs the question, if a \$2.5 billion rail line needed a one percent tax increase, what does a \$4 billion system need — even before cost overruns?

And what can we expect from the Alternatives Analysis?

We must remember that PB is a self-described 'client-focused' company.ⁱⁱⁱ Criminal defense attorneys are also client-focused. No matter how guilty they believe their clients are, they will defend them with all possible effort.

The client in the case of the Alternatives Analysis is not us, the people of the City and County of Honolulu. The client is Mayor Mufi Hanneman. And as is normal when elected officials are smitten with a vision, PB will make the best case for whatever the Mayor wants. Since PB has nearly \$10 million with which to do it, one assumes they will turn out very thorough documentation that will be quite plausible — on its face.

PB has to make its case for rail transit with the lowest credible construction costs and operating losses, together with the highest possible ridership projections. They will need these to justify their claim for a cost-effective lessening of traffic congestion by rail.

Similarly, since the Mayor wants rail, PB will have to show very high costs and little usage for the High-Occupancy Toll (HOT) lanes alternative.

They are driving up HOT lanes' costs by, for example, including very expensive elevated bus stops on the HOT lanes. These stops must comply with the Americans with Disability Act (ADA), which means escalators, elevators, and stairs for each one. And they will have to be very long to have buses entering at 60 mph, stopping and then accelerating back up to 60mph again.

No matter that no other HOT lanes project anywhere else has bus stops. It makes as much sense as putting express bus stops on our freeways.

There are limits to what PB can justify with their projections. Here are some of their other problems:

- The Federal Transit Administration (FTA) is now more watchful. Congress has been highly critical of the FTA lately because of its acceptance of transportation project projections that were catastrophically wrong. For example, PB's Big Dig project in Boston, which was originally forecast to cost \$2.5 billion and is now at \$15 billion and counting,^{iv} or their recent San Francisco Airport BART extension, whose ridership is less than half of what was projected.^v
- Tampa shows what it really costs to build HOT lanes. Tampa, Florida has just opened a ten-mile elevated three-lane, reversible tollway for a net cost of \$300 million, or \$10 million a lane-mile.^{vi} PB says that a 13-mile two-lane one would cost Honolulu "substantially greater than \$1 billion," or greater than \$38 million a lane mile. However, the U.S. military's Construction Cost Index shows Hawaii only 36 percent higher than Florida. Therefore, it is difficult to see how PB's \$1+ billion projection for HOT lanes will pass muster with FTA.
- Motorists will use highways. It will not be credible to forecast little use for HOT lanes since they are just highways — the HOT lanes designation merely describes how they are managed. With variably priced tolls, the HOT lanes will always be full and free flowing during rush hours; it will be just the toll charge that varies, not the usage.
- Oahu's significant decline in bus usage has to be explained. PB has to allow for the ongoing decline since 1984 in the percentage of people using public transportation on Oahu. They can hardly do what they did for the 1992 rail projections, which was to forecast a significant increase for bus only ridership and then piggyback rail ridership on top of that. The reason is that we have seen a further 20 percent decline in bus ridership since then that the FTA cannot ignore.
- PB cannot forecast traffic congestion relief from rail. That is because every single metro area in the U.S. with rail transit has seen an increase in traffic congestion in the last 20 years — every one.^{vii}

PB can be as client-centered as they want and defend their client's vision but, in the end, the jury will ponder the evidence and the verdict will be, "Guilty."

Cliff Slater is a regular columnist whose footnoted columns are at www.cliffslater.com

Footnotes:

ⁱ One can safely assume that it will be after the election.

ⁱⁱ aka 'Managed Lanes.'

ⁱⁱⁱ "Some of the biggest names in petrochemicals, power, and manufacturing count on PB for our expertise and experience in environmental planning, design, and construction management, and for the problem solving, client-focused abilities of our more than 4,800 employees, including 600 environmental scientists and engineers." <http://www.pbworld.com/services/environmental/downloads/environmental.pdf>

Bent Flyvbjerg, Mette K. Skamris Holm, and Søren L. Buhl. *How (In)accurate Are Demand Forecasts in Public Works Projects? The Case of Transportation*. Journal of the American Planning Association. Spring 2005. <http://www.planning.org/japa/pdf/JAPAFlyvbjerg05.pdf>

^{iv} *Ceiling collapse tip of Big Dig problems*. Washington Times. 7/23/06.
http://www.washtimes.com/national/20060723-121811-7700r_page2.htm

^v San Francisco Chronicle. BAY AREA BART to halt many rush-hour trains to SFO. Lack of Peninsula riders brings change -- system will save almost \$4 million a year. Tuesday, July 26, 2005
<http://www.sfgate.com/cgi-bin/article.cgi?f=/c/a/2005/07/26/BAGVNDTH5B1.DTL>

^{vi} Tampa-Hillsborough Expressway Authority presentation. <http://www.hhua.org/hhua-stone.pdf>

^{vii} *2005 Urban Mobility Report*. Texas Transportation Institute.
http://mobility.tamu.edu/ums/congestion_data/tables/national/table_4.pdf