

TAX INCREASE FOR HIGHWAYS AND BIKEWAYS

by Honolulu City Councilman Tom Berg

A CHOICE THE PUBLIC HAS A RIGHT TO MAKE

When the Honolulu City Council last month approved of a particular residential development project in Mililani that prohibits a percentage of residents from owning a car within that development, everyone living on Oahu should be outraged.

This type of attack on the motoring public by government has gone too far. It is called – Social Engineering, or in other terms, Smart Growth.

These tactics by elected officials have spawned a certain type of development scheme to ensure car users have it real bad if they want to live here. From residential tracts that offer little to next to nothing for supplying parking, to the one way in and one way out syndrome that plagues many of our communities, government has become the enemy.

On top of it all, our vehicle weight tax, registration fee, and fuel tax increases over the years have produced an antiquated roadway network. We are not only severely lane deficient, but also parking deficient on Oahu by design.

As the newest member serving on the Oahu Metropolitan Planning Organization's Policy Committee (OMPO), I refuse to coddle and condone the methodology of penalizing the individual motorist, the service vehicle driver, the freight operator, the bus rider, and even the bicycling community into a level of submission to serve and feed the rail endeavor.

In addition, funds to construct dedicated bike lanes and provide adequate shoulder space to protect pedestrians along thoroughfares has been habitually insufficient year after year. It has been this way since OMPO has been calling the shots.

To make matters worse, OMPO teamed up with Honolulu's Mayor and its City Council, as well as the State Legislature and Governor in 2005 to further the assault on the motoring public. They all advanced their approval for ACT 247 that forbade any tax increase to sustain and improve our highway infrastructure on Oahu. It is actually against the law to use any revenue from the General Excise Tax increase of a half of a percent toward roads and bike lanes on Oahu.

The result is we are to pour almost all of our cash collectively into a rail system that moves no one in a state of emergency, transports zero freight from our harbors to a store shelf, and depletes funds away from adding more bike lanes as part of a highway technology plan.

Furthermore, when rail is completed, our successful bus system will be transformed to herd its patrons into the rail spine to artificially induce rail ridership like it or not. And to make matters worse for our seniors and disabled, many who could once find a seat on the bus, will be standing for the duration of their rail trip since the rail cars are designed to cater to standing instead of sitting.

Since the State Legislature has refused to dedicate sufficient funding mechanisms to keep road building and maintenance up to par, it is time for drastic measures to counter this rail fiasco.

I am advocating the ninety-five percent of us and more who will not ride the rail, should have the option to approve of a tax increase to get us back into the road and bike lane building business. Resolution 11-249 requests the State Legislature allow the City Council and Mayor of Honolulu to increase the General Excise Tax by the same amount it did for the rail. Only in this instance, to be a dedicated tax for adding new bike lanes and highways to our landscape.

For every penny we raise the fuel tax, we garner roughly \$3 million a year-and car registration fees and vehicle weight tax increases basically fund just enough to keep our bridges from falling down. Taxing us this way to try to keep up with filling potholes isn't going to cut it.

The amount of money necessary to improve our travels will not transpire if we maintain the status quo and let rail put us further into debt as the sole solution.

Unfortunately, it may be time to let the rail be to some extent and realize the fight for traffic relief all along was a big set-up. Rail has proven to be a fixed fight that knocked down the motorist, the bus rider, and the bicycling community all in one swing. Either we sit back and do nothing and watch rail diminish our lifestyle and trap us even more on the roads, or we fight back and demand an infusion of funds to revive our quality of life. When traffic moves, the economy does so with it.

At two of my town hall meetings recently on this rail project, many rail supporters have come forward exposing the benefits and superiority of monorail and maglev over the steel wheel-on-steel rail that is being pursued. Folks want another look-see into this rail project and are confident rail can be done better than what we are getting. I am offering them solutions and have introduced a slew of resolutions for all to review and rally around.

My next town hall meeting on rail will be at the Mission Memorial Auditorium next to Honolulu Hale on the 6th of December from 6pm to 9pm and feature leaders in both the pro and con arena of this rail drama. It is not too late to get a cheaper, yet higher quality of rail technology that is much quieter and has a lesser visual impact upon our landscape.

Although a reversible expressway and bus rapid transit system is the ideal mode to actually reduce traffic congestion to the greatest degree, that battle was lost. So now it is time to regroup and demand money be raised to actually address traffic. That approach may be found in resolution 11-249.

Otherwise, we are prone to witness the conjuring up of more housing plots that restrict the homeowner's right to own a car. This is not the American way and a sad excuse for failing to build the roads we deserve and should demand.

Tom Berg
Honolulu City Council District One
768-5001
CELL- 753-7324
tberg@honolulu.gov