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COVER STORY



Waiting to get on at a downtown Honolulu stop, mid-morning, Friday, August 3

IMAGE: JOANA GONZALES

Honolulu's Big Bus Shibai

Cuts and re-routings have--surprise!--been met with backlash. Wait till the public learns how our bus money is being siphoned off for rail.

BY MATTHEW KAIN | AUG 8, 2012



COVER

On June 3, the city's Department of Transportation Services (DTS) implemented reductions to bus service, citing rising operating costs as the reason. The result: People are waiting longer at crowded stops to board buses that are more packed than ever. Some riders are being left behind because there's simply no room. Once they do get on, riders are faced with longer transit times.

This week

Honolulu's Big Bus Shibai

On June 3, the city's Department of Transportation Services (DTS) implemented reductions to bus service, citing rising operating costs as the reason. The result: People are waiting longer at crowded stops to board buses that are more packed than ever.

A take-along voter's chart

Click to view full-size PDF. Endorsements by Hawaii Government Employees Association, Sierra Club, Hawaii Women's Politi

I dissent

While the Sierra Club does great work in so many respects, it also is capable of bad judgement calls. As a member of the Oahu Sierra Club chapter, I find myself compelled to offer this rejoinder to Rick Barboza and Anthony Aalto's recent rhetorical dodge on the controversial position that the Sierra Club is taking in support of what I will call 'big rail'.

Beach bill volleyball

For a while, the elevens had it. On July 11, the Honolulu City Council voted 7-2 in favor of Bill



Public transportation is a core urban service. But more reductions are set for August 19th. While the city claims that rising costs require cuts, adequate bus funds are available—or would be, if they hadn't been switched over to rail.

Legends of the Shortfall

According to city Managing Director Doug Chin, operating costs for TheBus went up over \$10 million this year due to several key factors, including higher labor costs (which were negotiated to rise at a fixed rate prior to the Carlisle administration), and a 35 percent increase in the costs of oil (with projections going higher).

Somehow, DTS had to figure out a way to cover these costs. They squeezed as much as they could out of TheBus's budget, but still encountered a \$7 million shortfall in funds. So, like any good city agency, they started a public outreach process. They toured Oahu's Neighborhood Board circuit to get a feel for what the general public wanted them to do.

"During public outreach back then, the resounding feedback from the public was not to raise the fares during tough economic times," says Chin. Most bus riders probably recall that the administration of former Mayor Mufi Hannemann raised fares in 2010, citing similar oil-on-the-rise budget woes. With another fare hike apparently off the table, the only other ways to cover the deficit were either to reduce service—er—"optimize bus operations for even greater efficiencies," or increase taxpayer subsidies to TheBus.

"Increasing the bus subsidy by another \$7 million sounds like an easy fix until you realize that this is ultimately paid by people's property taxes," Chin notes. Also, a city council resolution (Resolution 00-29, introduced in 2000 by then-councilman Duke Bainum) does not allow the city to subsidize bus operations by more than 73 percent.

Instead, DTS implemented a series of seemingly drastic changes. They eliminated some very effective routes (like CityExpress route B which used to go between Kalihi and Waikiki), drastically changed others (like route 14, which served Diamond Head, Kapahulu and Kahala), and lengthened waiting times in rural areas where people are especially reliant on dependable service (like route 55, the main bus along the Windward Coast). All in all, DTS modified, reduced or eliminated no less than 13 different routes including five that served rural O'ahu neighborhoods.

Windward woes

Some residents who rely on TheBus—like those on the North Shore and Windward Coast—have a long way to go, and relatively few options for getting there. For people on a strict schedule who have to either get to work on time or pay the upsetting consequences (whether that be a write-up from supervisors, or worse, a firing), the decreased service is making commutes harder than ever. In windward Hau'ula, K.C. Connors has only a few miles to travel in order to get to work, but says her commute time can sometimes take several hours now that she has to spend so much time at the bus stop. "I'll probably have to get a car," says Connors, who has worked tirelessly to raise awareness of how the cuts have affected the rural Windward Coast. "People are adding hours to their work commute on this side," she laments. "That's a problem."

It's especially a problem for those who have to get all the way into town for work, like Carol Haines of Punaluu. Haines owns a car, but prefers to take TheBus to her job at Ala Moana. Lately though, a combination of inconsistency, excessive waiting and the discomfort of a standing-room-only makes it difficult for her to balance life's other

11 would have ended all commercial activity at Kailua and Kalama Beach Parks.

Park Sell-Offs

The Save Haleiwa Beach Park Coalition and park users Cora Sanchez and Steve Baldonado have filed suit against the City and County of Honolulu in State Circuit Court in order to stop the City from closing Haleiwa Beach Park Mauka and selling the land to private hotel developer Andy Anderson. The challenge is also timely in light of city plans for other parks.

Voters' guide

Ms. Adams expressed frustration about the lack of accessible information for voters to make decisions ["Political Newbies Get Into the Know," July 25].

Best in the nation?

Can someone write up something on the deteriorating situation of what once used to be pretty good bus service? I live in Nanakuli.

BRT or bust!

Sierra Club's "Beyond Rail" [July 18] articulates a future most prefer, and mass transit is a "critical component." I wonder, though, why would "BRT...require dozens of buses running for every train" (2 cars carrying 318 passengers) "equivalent"? BRT isn't locked into train configurations.

Getting it done

Lucidity instead of delusion from Ben ["Being Nice," June 27]—he'll be a role model as Mayor. "J.Arthur Rath III"

Into the light

Whatever wrongdoings this man ["Defending Otto," July 18] encountered have more than been rectified by way of business and personal exposure. Best of

Anybody care about Hannah's lawsuit? Nah, didn't think so. We're all too busy to read much fiction these days.

War on the Environment · 1 day ago

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obligations with using the bus to commute. "It's made me drive my car more," she says about the service cuts. "The thing is," she sighs, "I often drive right behind the bus."

David Henkin, an environmental lawyer and member of the Kahalu'u Neighborhood Board, says the decreased reliability has forced him to get behind the wheel, too. Henkin shrugs off the driving as a necessary evil in maintaining normalcy in his daily schedule, but sympathizes for those who have no other choice but to wait on the bus, rain or shine. "I get to choose whether or not I get into my car," says Henkin. "There is a whole segment of society that doesn't."

In a rural area that has one road, and one bus route, riders of the East Shore's Route 55—and Route 52, which travels the North Shore—seem to be the most severely affected by DTS's recent changes. Shouldn't the riders with the fewest options have their routes and schedules preserved as a core service?

"We tried not to touch the peak periods," says DTS Director Wayne Yoshioka when the *Weekly* posed this very question to him. The cuts, he says, were made only during the "off peak" hours, when bus ridership is supposed to be minimal. Yoshioka admits that certain changes were miscalculated, but adds, nothing is set in stone. He says DTS is continually adjusting its bus service in accordance with comments from riders. "That's currently not acceptable," he says of the copious comments he's received from Windward and North Shore residents regarding routes 55 and 52. "We're working on adjusting our schedule to take care of that."

It seems the only adjustment necessary is a complete restoration of the pre-cutback service. But Yoshioka, like others in the city administration, is looking forward, far into the future, to 2019, for the "real" relief.

Rail relief?

Contrary to what many people seem to think, Yoshioka—who is also an ex-officio member of HART's Board of Directors and former employee of Parsons Brinckerhoff (the company overseeing construction of the Honolulu rail project)—rides the bus. "Not every day," he says. "But I'm frequently on the bus." Unfortunately, his busy schedule requires him to travel all over the island. So like those who have the option, if he's in a hurry, he drives.

To hear Yoshioka explain route changes at a city council or neighborhood board meeting, it seems obvious he has a thorough understanding of the routes and the service they provide. He can spout off almost by memory which routes travel which streets and what alterations have been made to every route. He can also quite adeptly explain why every single change should make perfect sense. So why does everyone seem so displeased with his vision for overall bus grid efficiency? It's because Yoshioka's "real" solution is still a long way off.

"Long term, we're looking for rail to relieve us," Yoshioka says to the *Weekly*, noting that the clustered urban corridor is swallowing up buses in its gridlock and generally delaying service all over the island. "If rail can take over the heavy lifting in this urban corridor for us, [it] will release a lot of our buses, and we can then reallocate and move out to those areas that we really do want to supply better service to in the future," he says.

Rail, Yoshioka believes, is the ultimate solution to the rising cost of TheBus's operational expenses and Oahu's traffic congestion as a whole. Still, when asked directly, Yoshioka insists that these cuts are not directly related to rail, but to cover the overall rising costs of operations and fuel. It's this very type of ambiguous back and forth that has riders' political barometers rising. Many are alleging that these cuts—whether because of funding reasons, or otherwise—are directly related to rail. And they're exactly right.

Honolulu's Bottom-Line-Increase-Innovator award goes to: Otto Cake.

Our last hope

Having supported Ben Cayetano in his first gubernatorial campaign, I was all too quickly disillusioned. Then came the bitter public education strikes at the end of his second term in office.

In your hands

This analysis ["War on the Environment," Aug. 1] by Tom Coffman, one of Hawaii's major political writers, brilliantly connects state and local government with big money interests who are only looking out for themselves to build the useless rail project.

In HECO's defense

Some of Doc Berry's statements ("Go Figure" 7/18) need correction. He states "global oil prices have dropped about 22% since mid-2011" and then compares prices of gasoline, Matson shipping rates and electric bills, noting the first two have gone down while electricity here remains very costly.

Follow the money

Mr. Rosegg makes a good point regarding the price of oil used by HECO, followed by a far less substantial claim about TV ads.

Keep digging

Doc, as an educator, you used to ask us: "Wherefore, seeking whom, whence, by what way, how-purposed art thou come?" If w

Diverted funds

How one expenditure affects another in terms of municipal money can seem open to interpretation. But one thing that is absolutely and unequivocally true, is that Honolulu's collective political body—every legislator, council member, city administrator, journalist, citizen activist and know-it-all barfly—is sitting on the edge of its chair waiting to find out if the federal government is going to give us the \$1.55 billion we need to cover the rail project. It follows that, in one way or another, TheBus's funding is affected by the Honolulu rail project.

For starters, the rail project has commandeered certain federal funds intended for maintenance of TheBus and HandiVan services in its financial plan. The funds, known as 5307 funds, are given to the city by the Federal Transit Administration (FTA) to be used primarily for maintenance and the acquisition of new vehicles. They can also be used to build and maintain transit centers.

Yoshioka insists that he's still using 5307 funds for TheBus as long as the rail project has no need for them. They're just included in the [rail?] plan to strengthen it, he says. But if the \$1.55 billion falls through, all future 5307 funds will go toward the rail until it's paid for in full.

In that event, the [bus] funds won't pay for very much of what is needed (the rest will likely be garnered via an extension of the General Excise Tax) but the money will definitely not be used for TheBus. Currently, it's as if the money is in two places—the rail's financial plan and DTS's budget. But if, for whatever reason, the feds don't pony up \$1.55 billion, there will be no question that the 5307 funds will go to the rail. "The backup would have to come from either GET surcharge or federal funds," says Yoshioka. "The only other federal funds available are the 5307."

There's more evidence that ties these cuts to the rail and allude to DTS having had these changes planned for years.

First, the department never asked for money to cover the increase in expenses during this year's budget preparations. "If they had asked for it during the budget [preparations] we could have found the money," City Council Budget Committee chair Ann Kobayashi tells the *Weekly*. "[DTS] never asked for more money for fuel or anything," she adds. Second, the rises in labor costs couldn't have been unforeseen; labor contracts and their planned increases were negotiated five years ago (again, under the Hannemann administration). In 2008, O'ahu bus drivers, mechanics and other support staff approved a contract giving them a 21 percent pay increase over five years. 2012 is the fifth year, and includes a five percent increase in wages. This is literally old news.

Neither expense seems justifiably unforeseeable. Additionally, similar versions of these changes were developed and spoken of in both the Honolulu Rail projects Final Environmental Impact Statement and the city's Short Range Transit Plan, both completed in 2010. Again, to say these cuts are completely rail-removed seems grossly misleading.

"It's a shell game, I think," says city councilwoman Ann Kobayashi to the *Weekly*. Thankfully, Kobayashi and her colleagues in the city council have heard the lamenting cries of their constituents and acted, or perhaps, reacted, accordingly.

Council steps in

Two measures in the City Council—both initiated by Councilman Tom Berg and cosponsored by chair Ernie Martin—call for the city administration to find some kind of way to restore the service recently cut by DTS.

Resolution 12-173 urges the mayor to find the funding and restore all routes that have been cut, and Resolution 12-177 seeks to do just that by suspending the fare box recovery policy for FY2013. This would temporarily allow a higher subsidy rate to TheBus. Both measures were put up for adoption at the next city council floor meeting on August 15. That's three days after the primary election (in which the anti-rail Berg is being challenged for his District One City Council seat) and the day after the next wave of cuts is scheduled to take affect.

"I think what it really comes down to is a fundamental difference in priorities between the administration and the council," said Councilman Stanley Chang at the city council budget committee meeting on Wednesday, July 25. "There are funding sources available to fully restore all the cuts and it is simply the administration's position that it refuses to do so."

So where does Mayor Peter Carlisle stand? The *Weekly* attempted to solicit comments from him, but was referred to city Managing Director Douglas Chin instead. "Mayor Carlisle is committed to working with the City Council on these issues," Chin told the *Weekly* regarding to the measures introduced in the City Council.

Other mayoral candidates have already expressed their intentions to fully restore bus service if elected in the upcoming primary on August 11. Kirk Caldwell said service to TheBus will be fully restored during his first week in office. "Where there's a will, there's a way," he said in a statement. And, of course, we all know former Governor Ben Cayetano's idea: Kill the rail altogether and focus on bus service exclusively.

If Mayor Carlisle were as committed to public transportation as he says he is, he would restore bus service to a level we can all appreciate—whether we need to get to the doctor, a beach, a bar... or a voting booth. If not, we're in for a long wait to get on for a long (and crowded!) ride.



COMMENTS

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