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## Why Honolulu's rail system should end at Middle Street

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By Cliff Slater, Panos Prevedouros and Randall Roth

There are many benefits of ending the rail route at Middle Street, and the reality is that the city has already breached its federal full funding grant agreement — by not completing the entire rail project by the agreed-upon date, and by its inability to identify the source of funds needed to reach Ala Moana Center.

A fraction of the money saved by stopping at Middle Street could be used to enhance other elements of the city's multimodal transportation system, implement proven methods of reducing traffic congestion, repair roads, build infrastructure needed for affordable housing, effectively address the causes and problems of homelessness, and more.

City Councilmember Radiant Cordero recently wrote that stopping rail at Middle Street would “put the city in breach of the full funding grant agreement, triggering lawsuits and repayment of federal funds,” and that “not building rail to Ala Moana would cause immeasurable negative impacts” (“Stopping rail at Middle Street won't save money,” Star-Advertiser, Letters, May 5).

But her letter did not mention estimated costs that skyrocketed from \$3 billion in 2006 (“Rail cost estimate: \$3 billion,” Star-Advertiser, June 23, 2006) to \$12.4 billion earlier this year (“Honolulu rail project's price tag hits \$12.4 billion,” Star-Advertiser, March 18, 2021), or that unsolved construction problems have some observers wondering if the rail project can be completed as planned at any cost.

Beyond finances, it's worth noting that relatively recent developments are disrupting public transportation systems across the world. Examples include the growing trend toward working at home (which began well before COVID), telemedicine, ride-sharing transportation networks — including ride-hailing services like Uber Pool that serve groups of unrelated riders, artificial

intelligence generally, and particularly AI as it relates to autonomous vehicles and traffic regulation.

Cordero said that stopping rail at Middle Street would result in “a stranded asset that places a heavier tax burden on the city, which would be ineligible for federal funds to operate and maintain any system that stops short of Ala Moana.” Again, the reality is quite different.

A state-of-the-art transfer station at Middle Street could facilitate quick transfers to other modes of transportation, such as dedicated-lane shuttles to Chinatown, downtown, Kakaako or Ala Moana Center, and express buses to University of Hawaii-Manoa or Waikiki. This would be consistent with rail’s stated purpose of adding an element to Honolulu’s multimodal transportation system.

Stopping at Middle Street also would provide commuters a way to get beyond choke points, such as the H1/H2 interchange and the Middle Street merge, in a predictable amount of time and would save more than \$3 billion in future expenditures.

City officials put themselves and city taxpayers in a pickle by engaging in strategic misrepresentations and rushing into an ill-planned project. We see this in interoffice emails at the Federal Transit Administration (FTA). They note, for example, that Honolulu’s administration put itself in a “pickle” by setting unrealistic start dates and starting construction “without authority despite warnings that it would create an ineligibility for the project.”

FTA officials also commented in email on the city’s “lousy practices of public manipulation,” willingness to “deceive with no remorse,” use of “inaccurate statements,” and a culture of “never enough time to do it right, but lots of time to do it over.”

We cannot go back in time to make fully informed decisions, but it’s not too late to end rail at Middle Street.

**Cliff Slater is a retired local businessman; Panos Prevedouros is a civil engineering professor at the University of Hawaii-Manoa; Randall Roth is a retired UH law professor.**