

## Honolulu Rail Nominated for Transportation Planning Excellence Award

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### HART and City Nominated for Prestigious Award

From Fix Oahu, July 29, 2016

The Federal Transit Administration was delighted to receive our submission in mid-July.

The Transportation Planning Excellence Awards Program is a biennial awards program co-developed by the Federal Transit Administration (FTA). This program recognizes and celebrates outstanding transportation practices performed by planners and decision makers in communities across the country (see [Award Criteria](#)).

Cliff Slater, Panos Prevedouros and Randall Roth nominate the City of Honolulu (City) and Honolulu Authority Rapid Transportation (HART) for the following, barely believable feats:

1. Against all odds and at a time of record federal deficits and a slumping local economy, the City and HART somehow managed to extract and divert more than \$5 billion in local funds (the upper range of which is still a mystery) and garner FTA support for \$1.55 billion in federal funds – all to build an elevated heavy rail system that was out-of-date before construction even began ([Antiquated Rail System](#))!
2. Making the funding for this Antiquated Rail System all the more remarkable is a [population of potential commuters on Oahu](#) that is dramatically smaller than the smallest urban area in the U.S.A. [that still has an Antiquated Rail System](#).
3. One could perhaps argue that San Juan, Puerto Rico pulled off an equally amazing accomplishment by securing its own Antiquated Rail System relatively recently, but Puerto Rico is just a territory (so heaven alone knows what really goes on there) and San Juan did not have itself to point to as evidence that Antiquated Rail Systems invariably cost a lot more, and attract considerably fewer riders, than self-interested planners and politicians tend to predict. We now know that the actual cost of San Juan's Antiquated Rail System [exceeded the final funding agreement estimate by 78%](#) and that actual ridership is [less than a third of the projected number](#). In fact, the combined ridership of bus and rail is now less than just bus ridership before rail (see [p. 25](#) of 32 and [p. 23](#) of 29).
4. The City and HART even managed to impede and then ignore the work of [The Infrastructure Management Group \(IMG\)](#), an independent expert retained by the then-governor for a second opinion on the likely cost of an Antiquated Rail System. Here's how IMG described its experience and findings:

"[T]he IMG Team found the extreme difficulty in being able to obtain information from the City and its consultants both unique in our collective experience and [a hindrance to] our ability to perform the project. This was also a puzzlement – why would the City wish to restrict the team engaged to review the project's financial plan from being able to

obtain the information necessary to perform its work?

"A multi-billion dollar transportation improvement project, particularly one that is proposed to be operated in, and funded by, an urbanized area that is far smaller than the norm for such projects, should have its financial plan developed with methodologies that incorporate the highest professional and technical standards and techniques. As we demonstrate [in this report], the financial planning and modeling process for [this] Project fails this 'best practices' test in many ways."

5. Making the pursuit of an Antiquated Rail System all the more remarkable was the [discovery](#) that senior people at the FTA had commented [in interagency email](#) about the City's "lousy practices of public manipulation," use of "inaccurate statements," and culture of "never [having] enough time to do it right, but [lots of time to do it over.](#)" FTA also noted that the City had put itself in a "pickle" by setting unrealistic start dates for construction, and criticized the City's "casual treatment of burials."

6. Speaking of which, who could have predicted that the City and HART could skirt federal burial laws, essentially by denying the high likelihood of unearthing protected remains and promising to be "respectful?"

7. Equally noteworthy was the City and HART's mischaracterization of the viable [alternatives to rail](#)—you know, the ones that would have been affordable and actually relieve traffic congestion, protect the environment, and preserve the Hawaiian sense of place.

8. We would be remiss in not mentioning that the City and HART managed to convince much of the public that an Antiquate Rail System would actually reduce the current level of traffic congestion despite an [Environmental Impact Statement](#) (EIS) that said [the exact opposite](#). In all fairness to other nominees for this award, however, the FTA assisted that particular ruse by stating in a press release a belief that "this project will bring much needed relief from the suffocating congestion on the H-1 Freeway." This statement from the FTA was directly contrary to the FTA-approved Final EIS in which the City acknowledged that "traffic congestion will be worse in the future with rail than what it is today without rail."

9. On their own, the City and HART started construction without even beginning to plan for the eventual payment of operating costs. Just imagine, more than \$100 million per year in added operating costs (roughly 5% of the City's entire budget), and the City/HART does an Alfred E. Newman imitation: "What, us worry?"

10. Similarly, the City and HART have not said where it will find money for repairs and maintenance to the Antiquated Rail System. With the Washington DC rail system literally falling apart one might have expected someone in our nation's capitol—perhaps even someone with the FTA—to mention that. Likewise for the City and HART's failure to plan for security, fare collection, adequate parking, and accessible bathrooms.

11. In 2004 Mayor Mufi Hannemann claimed it would cost \$2.7 billion to build a 34-mile Antiquated Rail System. The estimated cost is now \$8.1 billion, and climbing, while the

planned length is down to 20 miles, and shrinking.

12. When an independent financial audit found in 2016 that HART had “failed to perform qualitative analysis” and had relied on “insufficient cost-control,” HART called the audit “a joke,” and kept doing what it had been doing. [Booya!](#)

We hope that the FTA can detect satire, and that it will someday hold itself accountable, along with the City and HART, for Honolulu’s rail fiasco.