

Why does Sierra Club support the Honolulu Rail Transit project?

The Sierra Club believes one of the biggest environmental challenges facing O'ahu today is suburban sprawl. A grade-separated, rail mass transit system is our best opportunity to fundamentally shift our development paradigm away from suburban sprawl toward denser, more compact urban development.

No other organization in Hawai'i has fought as hard as the Sierra Club to block development of farmland and open land: Sandy Beach, Turtle Bay, Waimea Bay, Koa Ridge, Ho'opili, and so on. We soon expect to receive permission from the national Sierra Club to appeal the Land Use Commission's decisions to allow development to go ahead on the Ho'opili and Koa Ridge monster-sprawl schemes. We remain implacably opposed to those developments.

Since statehood, sprawl has consumed more than half of our prime agricultural land. More than 3,200 acres of prime (Class A & B) farmland on O'ahu has been reclassified from agricultural to urban in the last 20 years alone. This does not include the more than 2,300 acres the Land Use Commission recently reclassified as urban in the Ho'opili and Koa Ridge projects because the Sierra Club is challenging those decisions in court. In the last half-century we have gone from growing half the food we consume to less than 10 percent. The car-dependent model - in which suburban residents are connected to jobs, stores and schools by freeway - has given us the most congested traffic in the nation and made us more reliant on imported oil than any other state in the union. It has stretched our infrastructure and despoiled the beauty of the island, which sustains our biggest industry: tourism.

But even if, as we hope, we win the Ho'opili and Koa Ridge battles and even though we have won others, the reality is that we are losing the overall war. Developers have paved 10 square miles of farmland and open land just since 1996. Even if, or perhaps especially if, we manage to succeed in blocking Ho'opili and Koa Ridge, the pressures to develop will continue unabated. This disastrous pattern has also deprived our city neighborhoods of the walkable, mixed-use density that ensures economic vitality - killing mom & pop businesses and leaving empty storefronts scattered throughout Kaimuki, Mo'ili'ili, McCully, Iwilei, Kalihi, Palama and elsewhere.

We believe this development model is unsustainable. Yet the city estimates that we will need over 75,000 new homes to accommodate more than 125,000 new residents in the next 23 years and more than 100,000 homes for 190,000 residents by 2050. The O'ahu Metropolitan Planning Organization uses an even higher number: 201,769 new residents by 2035. If those numbers are extrapolated, we could be looking at half a million more residents by the end of the century. Scary as those numbers are, as a state in the Union, Hawaii does not have the legal authority to block American residents from moving here nor to stop foreigners from buying property here. We do not wish to stop families from having babies and we firmly believe that it is reasonable for families to wish to see their keiki grow up here, to become members of this community, to start families of their own and to create extended 'ohana, as is the way of the islands. So growth is inevitable. The only choice is between the unsustainable model we have pursued thus far and "smart growth" policies.

In this context the Sierra Club does not believe it is our job to block new housing. Hawai'i has amongst the highest rate of homelessness , lowest home ownership and worst multi-generational occupancy rates in the nation. There is a crying need for decent housing. The issue is not whether we build more homes, but what type of homes and where. If we continue with business as usual, we will pave another 22 square miles of land by 2050 . Suburbs will inevitably sprout on the North Shore and the Windward side. The O'ahu that we know and love will no longer be recognizable.

The only way to combat that sprawl is by focusing all new development in a tightly enforced urban growth corridor on the leeward side. The increased urban density such a planning model demands can only be accommodated around an efficient mass transit system. We believe such a system has to be grade separated from automobile traffic. If it is not separated, it will not be efficient. If it is not efficient, people will not use it. If people do not use it, demand for housing in the traditional urban core of the city will not grow and pressure for suburban development will continue.

The Sierra Club believes we have an obligation to future generations to plan now to accommodate growth. The solution of a rail system may seem unpalatable to some, but the consequences of not building an efficient mass transit system are even worse. Such a system could reduce highway capital and maintenance costs by more than \$9 billion over the next four decades, reduce the distance O'ahu drivers travel by some one and a half **billion** miles a year in 2050, significantly reduce our water and energy consumption (and with it our carbon footprint), and save the average family over \$7000 a year in energy costs. The American Public Transportation Association (APTA) uses an even higher number, suggesting that residents on O'ahu could save on average \$964 per month or \$11,573 every year by switching to transit.

Support for such a "fixed guideway" mass transit system has long been Sierra Club policy. Until now we have not taken that policy the next step to support the current rail project. Like many others we were unhappy with the public consultation process used by Mayor Hannemann. We were extremely displeased that the first phase of the system begins in the middle of our most productive food-growing farmland in Hono'uli'uli and that it does not extend to Kapolei, Salt Lake, and to two of the busiest destinations on the island: UH and Waikiki. We were also very concerned about the ugliness of the elevated section in town. But today we no longer have the luxury of sitting on the sidelines. Unfortunately, the choice in the current election is not between two well-developed and credible mass transit systems. It is between a serious rail system and a vague Bus Rapid Transit system that will worsen congestion on our streets and that does little to create an urban growth corridor or to halt suburban sprawl.

For those who have lived here all their lives it comes down to accepting that O'ahu is changing in ways that no one really likes. If we add rail, Honolulu will become even more like a busy mainland city, something like San Francisco perhaps - the city will add hustle and bustle and noise. Honolulu will not be and can never again be the sleepy place it was 50 years ago. That is a really difficult change for people to accept.

The other alternative is to allow Honolulu to remain relatively low density and to see more and more suburbs sprawl out into the hinterland. Those suburbs won't bustle as much, indeed during the day they would be quiet deserted dormitory towns as people fight their way on ever more crowded freeways into town.

These are real choices. Both are unpalatable to almost everyone. But we made a choice - make the city more city, in order to keep the country, country. It's a facile slogan, but it captures the essence of our debate.

Our support of this rail project does not come in isolation. As we have repeatedly stated, our opposition to Ho'opili and Koa Ridge is unwavering and we will fight any further iterations of these monster suburbs - Koa Ridge 2, Ho'opili Mauka, etc. We will aggressively pursue policies at the state legislature and in the City Council to ensure a hard urban growth boundary – like the one that has worked so well in Portland. We advocate walkable mixed-use communities. We will fight for policies that force all major new development into the urban growth boundary, especially along the rail corridor. We oppose growth outside the General Plan and support infrastructure, financing and tax policies in the urban core that will facilitate dense infill development.

We will push the state and the city to adopt a menu of carrot and stick measures that encourage and facilitate urban infill development and create economic disincentives for sprawl. Such measures include:

- Upgraded sewer systems and other critical infrastructure to cope with higher density projects;
- Location-Efficient Mortgages, which provide better loan terms based on a home's proximity to public transportation or the center of a city;
- Impact fees, which are charged to developers to pay for new infrastructure outside the rail transit corridor;
- Split-rate property taxes, which encourage development in existing communities by taxing buildings at a lower rate than land; and
- Cutting subsidies for low-wage industries and high-impact activities.

All of these tools intrinsically deal with population growth by rendering currently un-urbanized areas, especially environmentally fragile places, off-limits to new development and by instead channeling growth into areas that can handle it.

We will fight for comprehensive, island-wide planning that expands agriculture and food production, that reduces energy consumption, that addresses our horrendous traffic problems, and that redirects development pressure away from La'ie, Kailua, and other parts of O'ahu back to the urban core.

Moreover we will work to improve the current rail plan. We will challenge the Honolulu Authority for Rapid Transportation to collaborate with environmental groups to reduce the system's visual impact and to extend it as fast as possible to UH, Kapolei, and Waikiki so that it affords as many citizens as possible the benefits of congestion-free transit and thus put us on a path to reducing sprawl.

One last thing: our decision has not been driven by offers of money from big corporations or construction unions. If only that were true! It is because we insist on doing what we believe is right for the environment, come hell or high water, that we are not a wealthy organization. We speak truth to power and usually power doesn't like it.

In summary: we believe an efficient mass transit system is the only way to change our development and halt sprawl; and we believe that rail is the only way to create an efficient mass transit system.

###