

Gathering Place

Transit allows communities to control future growth

By Dean Uchida

POSTED: 01:40 a.m. HST, Oct 19, 2008

It is frightening to watch the debate on the proposed rail transit system as it appears to be moving in a direction that divides the community in different ways: West Oahu versus East Honolulu-Windward Oahu; those willing to pay versus those who are not; advocates of building more roads, buses and cars versus those who want to invest in a fixed-guideway system.

Regardless of your point of view, it might benefit all of us to see how successful transit projects have been created in other areas. Much of the recent public discussion on Honolulu's transit system has been focused on "transportation alternatives" to address traffic and congestion problems. In comparison, three cities with successful transit systems (Vancouver, Portland and Denver) approached the implementation of rail transit not as a transportation alternative, but as a tool for "growth management." The underlying issue is growth, not traffic.

Each of the cities started with a clear vision of the future based on "quality of life" measurements that were embraced by the residents. Growth management was critical in planning for their quality-of-life goals. Each of the cities developed defined limits on physically growing "out," and thus developed strategies to grow "up." Transit was then used as a tool to implement their various growth management techniques by focusing new growth and increasing density in areas identified for growth.

This community vision of the future provided areas not serviced by rail, with quality-of-life benefits such as open space, agricultural use and low-density uses. This would be similar to Honolulu's "Keep the Country, Country" by preserving the less dense, more green and open areas and using transit to focus where growth should occur. Thus, in theory, everyone benefits from the enhanced quality of life and everyone pays for it.

The common thread that linked these three cities is the "transit culture" that each city embraces. This transit culture is reflected in how the individual citizens view rail, pedestrians, bikes, buses and cars as alternative modes of transportation. It is also reflected in their willingness to pay for these services through taxes and fees, as well as through an overall acceptance of living in a dense, urban environment.

This is not to say that decisions are not controversial; however, the underlying transit culture seems to keep the focus on improving the quality of life for future generations.

Transit essentially serves as a growth management tool to focus density. Transit was never thought of as simply a means to move people. Each of the cities' underlying philosophy regarding quality of life and economic development is based on compacting development and density into areas that are serviced by transit.

All of the cities took a very long-term view of their systems. A 30- to 50-year planning horizon is the general outlook for these systems. And each city had different measurements of success that they would use to gauge progress. In Vancouver, a measurement of success was that a person's commute 20 years from now would not take any longer than the time it takes today.

Finally, perhaps we should consider what our future will be like without transit. As oil prices rise, what reasonable alternatives are we providing the future residents of Honolulu if we don't proceed with transit today? Will we be able to grow to accommodate the needs of our future generations, or will we simply preserve what we have and let the next generations fend for themselves?

It is interesting to note that as we engage in our emotional debate about whether or not we should proceed with transit, other cities with no plans for transit are having to resort to various measures to relieve the economic burden on their residents of commuting by car every day. These include a four-day work week and forcing people to ride an unreliable public bus system. It is questionable whether these alternatives are sustainable as oil prices rise.

Perhaps the real question is: Can we afford not to invest in transit now if we want to preserve any hope of improving the quality of life for our future generations?

Dean Uchida is vice president of Ho'opili D.R. Horton -- Schuler Division.