

Rene Mansho launched HART

The Honolulu Authority for Rapid Transportation (HART) was not established for any of the reasons given by our political establishment. The City Administration had proposed a Transit Authority ostensibly, “so we can take as much politics out of [rail] as possible.” And according to the Honolulu Advertiser, “it makes perfect sense.”

But it did not make sense to us. We said at the time,

“The Administration has yet to make its case on the need for a Public Transit Authority. Elsewhere in the U.S. all the Transit Authorities we could find are established to deal with jurisdictional issues between neighboring counties. Honolulu may well be the only county in the U.S. that has its own transit authority. Until such time as we are given a reasonable explanation for the necessity for such an authority we should assume something untoward is afoot and therefore oppose it.”

“Even worse, HART does not run TheBus, even though a common fare structure with rail is promised and bus schedules will have to be coordinated with rail. That alone tells you that something strange is going on.”

“The only reason that makes sense to us is that it is done to shield elected officials from the harsh criticisms that will well up from voters when the cost overruns and ridership shortfalls occur and consequent increases in property taxes are needed. Then the mostly anonymous HART appointees will take the flak.”

But they went ahead with a city referendum and the public bought the idea that it would take the politics out of rail, and the council majority went along because they wished to be shielded from the rail fall out.

And so in 2011, the Transit Authority’s nine voting members were picked. Three by the City Council, three by the Administration, the State Transportation Director, the City Transportation Director with one more to be chosen by the other eight. And the Authority was to take over all responsibility for the rail project including budgeting and bonding.

It finally dawned on me yesterday why the Transit Authority was established but for that you have to go back 20 years to the last rail attempt.

In 1991 the City Council began with only two city councilmembers in opposition to the proposed rail project of that time, which was quite similar to the present rail project in design, cost, and federal funds — allowing for inflation.

Over the ensuing 20 months one councilmember after another became disenchanted with the rail project until in September 1992, there were five members for rail and four opposed. The two members who switched did so as it neared the point where they would be committing billions of dollars for rail.

Then came a crucial vote in the Council’s Transportation Committee and Councilmember Rene Mansho, to everyone’s astonishment, switched sides and the vote became 5-4 in opposition.

The tears, bitterness, rancor and threats that followed were something to behold and the authorities treated Rene as if she were the only vote in opposition, the other four who voted in opposition were forgotten.

Fast forward 20 years: It finally dawned on me that the City Administration had not forgotten this episode and the Transit Authority was established solely to pre-empt a recurrence of the Rene

Mansho episode. The City Administration and the City Council majority has appointed, or has in their employ, seven of the nine members. They are fireproof. No matter how much voter pressure was put on potentially backsliding Councilmembers, it would no longer matter.

Virtually all responsibility was to be taken away from the Council and given it to HART while the Council still generally favored rail. Since HART members are not up for reelection the Administration no longer has to fear the voters.

Effectively, Rene Mansho was responsible for launching HART.

But the City Council balked at handing over budgetary matters, and that one change may turn out to have saved us from utter financial disaster.