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Outdoor Circle opposes city's rail plan

By Kevin Dayton

The Outdoor Circle is taking a new, hard-line stance against the city's planned elevated rail transit system, calling the rail project the biggest threat to Oahu's landscape in the group's 100-year history.

The organization indicated it might tap its Legal Defense Fund to fight the project in court, according to a policy statement released by the group this week.

The Outdoor Circle was founded in 1912, and is one of the state's leading environmental advocacy organizations. The new rail policy statement was published in its quarterly newsletter, Greenleaf, distributed to about 3,000 members statewide.

The organization's board of directors initially believed outright opposition to elevated rail was "not in the best interest" of Honolulu or The Outdoor Circle, but that changed with a board vote to oppose the project last month, Chief Executive Officer Mary Steiner said.

Steiner explained in the newsletter statement that "as the project has evolved, it has become apparent that the cost to our visual environment and the livability of our communities is just too great. Consequently, the board's position has evolved."

In a blog post on The Outdoor Circle's website, the organization said it repeatedly urged the city to explain how it will mitigate the "horrific visual damage to this island as well as the degradation to neighborhoods" along the rail route.

"Imagine the cumulative visual impact of more than 20 miles of a massive elevated concrete guideway, supported by 720 large concrete columns with the inevitable graffiti and enormous transit stations," the blog post continues. "The project is destined to become an ugly scar across one of the most beautiful places on earth while there is little evidence that it will bring relief to Oahu's unacceptable traffic situation."

Hawaii environmental groups have been divided on the rail issue. The Sierra Club Oahu Group supports rail as an alternative to automobile travel, but the environmental advocacy organization Life of the Land opposes the project.

The environmental group Hawaii's Thousand Friends, meanwhile, has joined in a legal challenge filed in federal court against the city and the Federal Transit Administration over the rail project.

Until now, The Outdoor Circle has stressed the need to protect trees and view planes along the rail route, while Outdoor Circle staff worked with the city by advocating for protecting and transplanting trees in the path of the rail guideway. Those efforts will continue, according to the newsletter.

Scott Ishikawa, spokesman for the Honolulu Authority for Rapid Transportation, issued a statement Tuesday that "we're disappointed to hear about the Outdoor Circle's opposition."

"We have been working regularly with them regarding the tree relocation process and working diligently to accommodate their numerous requests," Ishikawa said.

"We have provided site tours to the Outdoor Circle staff of our work areas, including our nursery where the trees are temporarily housed. We also meet with them regularly for updates. It is shortsighted to oppose this project at this juncture when hundreds of trees are slated to be replanted and landscaping plans are being prepared for the rail route," he said.

The Outdoor Circle did submit sometimes-scathing comments last year on the environmental impact statement for the rail project, citing "the destructive visual elements of the transit system."

The organization argued the city's proposed tree plantings and other efforts would only superficially offset the visual impacts of the elevated guideway from Kapolei along Nimitz Highway to Ala Moana Center.

"No level of design or landscape can erase the physical, visual barricade being created to mauka-makai views for the entire length of the project," Bob Loy, director of environmental programs for The Outdoor Circle, wrote in comments submitted on the environmental impact statement.