A Sample of Traffic Outcomes of the Harris Administration and Suggestions for the New Mayor

Expanded text of Testimony Provided to City Council of the City and County of Honolulu Budget Committee on September 30, 2004

by

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A sample of five outcomes of the Harris Administration which have major negative impacts on traffic conditions on Oahu is given below.

1. In recent years, Waikiki roadways have lost several lanes in the east-west direction (one lane on Kalakaua Avenue, two lanes on Kuhio Avenue and one lane on Ala Wai Boulevard). As a result, the capacity of streets to move vehicles was reduced from roughly 14,000 vehicles per hour to less than 10,000 vehicles per hour.

Several lanes were narrowed and buses and fire trucks have to make maneuvers or climb over the curbs or medians in order to turn at intersections. As a result, they block traffic and create a hazard for pedestrians. Fewer and narrower lanes have a major impact on day-to-day operations (i.e., slower, more congested traffic flow), including emergency response. This significant reduction in roadway capacity may prove disastrous if a massive evacuation is needed because of a tsunami or hurricane.

2. The 10 BRT vehicles ordered at $749,000 each compared to standard articulated buses with the same passenger capacity costing $463,000 have complex hybrid-diesel propulsion technology which will increase our maintenance costs. At a minimum, we'll need to train staff and retool for hybrid propulsion for just 10 new buses whereas *TheBus* already has several hundred diesel powered buses. Importantly, no part of Oahu is an EPA non-attainment zone, thus, pollution reducing technology is unnecessary and the reduction in pollution of 10 BRT vehicles will be imperceptible.

3. The way Kuhio Avenue was redesigned with two narrow lanes per direction, these BRT vehicles will have a hard time in making a turn and rerouting out of Kuhio Avenue if there is an accident blocking lanes or an intersection. That's another reason to avoid having such large vehicles in Waikiki. The new administration should examine the economic benefits of selling the BRT vehicles to cities with existing hybrid bus fleets and replacing them with standard articulated buses.

4. BRT stops involve one foot high sidewalks for berthing. These unusually tall curbs are a hazard to pedestrians and jaywalkers and further restrict the limited sidewalk length available for tour buses, trolleys, taxis and limousines that provide the primary transportation service to our visitors in Waikiki.

5. DTS is responsible for all 800+ intersections on Oahu with traffic lights (or traffic signals). Most intersection signals work sub-optimally which causes long delays, wasted time and wasted fuel. This is because staffing of the traffic signals section of DTS has been inadequate and traffic

engineering staff have not been given authority to manage traffic signals. For over 15 years, electrical engineers have been supervising the section of DTS responsible for traffic signals. Although electrical engineers are essential for the operation and maintenance of our electronically-controlled traffic signals, the design, evaluation and operation of traffic signal systems is the professional responsibility of civil/traffic engineers, thus, our signal system should be managed accordingly.

Some speculate that adequate resources were deliberately not given and improvements to traffic signals were deliberately not made so that poor traffic conditions would force the traveling public to support the proposed BRT system. Reality appears to support the speculations: DTS paid $384,000 for a consulting study for traffic signal re-timing which was completed in 1999, partly in response to my complaint in the newspapers in 1996 about poor traffic signal operations. According to 2004 project status reports of the OMPO, the signal re-timing study has been "under review" by the City since 1999. This study is now largely obsolete because traffic signal timings need revisions at intervals of one to two years.

My advice to the new mayor is that he should look into and implement several effective transportation improvements instead of wasting four years and over $20 million to study a new public transit system, develop the requisite EIS and obtain FTA approvals.

Census data show that in 1995 the number of vehicles became equal to the number of drivers in the U.S. and vehicles have exceeded drivers ever since. The U.S. reached automobile ownership saturation nearly 10 years ago. Automobile sales may be strong, but this only reflects the desire of people to own multiple personal automobiles tailored to their lifestyle. Each driver can only drive one vehicle at a time. The excess number of vehicles remains parked. Statements of "explosive growth of cars" and "impending traffic gridlock" are unfounded political rhetoric.

The main purpose of public transit is to transport the auto-less and those who cannot drive. There is abundant evidence that public transit is not an effective antidote to traffic congestion. This is true even in public transit rich cities such as Chicago, London and Paris. Therefore, plans for large public transit projects as solutions to traffic congestion problems are unnecessary and only help to divert efforts and resources from affordable, desirable and effective solutions, many of which will also improve service by *TheBus*. A loosely prioritized sample of actions for Oahu follows (the agency or entity most likely responsible for effecting the proposed action is shown in parentheses):

1. Optimization and coordination of intersection traffic lights. (City DTS)
2. Establishment of a transportation and tourism coordinator to provide a major missing link between (1) state and city planning and operations agencies, and (2) private transportation providers and the visitor industry including bus, trolley, taxi, limousine, airline, hotel, tour and travel agent companies. (OMPO or Governor's Office)
3. Improvements to H-1 Freeway and congestion-sensitive flow management with ramp meters. (State DOT)
4. Expansion of functions and substantial use of Oahu's two traffic control centers and rapid incident/accident management: Presently a low payoff is realized for the sums expended. (DTS, DOT and HPD)
5. Continuation of improvements to our award-winning *TheBus* with more express buses connecting regional hubs. (DTS and OTS)

6. Peak demand reduction with 4 day, 10-hour-per day work schedule for some employees. (All employers with support from DOT and DTS)
7. Peak demand reduction by switching UH-Manoa and a few large high schools to a 9 AM start time. (DOT and DOE in coordination with private schools.)
8. Implementation of afternoon zipper lane along the H-1 Freeway. (DOT)
9. Construction of a two-lane reversible flow viaduct along Nimitz Highway. (DOT)
10. Implementation of peak commute period contraflow lane along Pali Highway. (DOT and DTS)
11. Grade separation of congested intersecting arterials. (DOT and DTS)
12. Planning for a (slim) reversible two-lane tollway between the H-1/H-2 merge and downtown. (DOT)

List of abbreviations

BRT: Bus Rapid Transit, a bus-based transit system running mostly on exclusive traffic lanes
DOE: State Department of Education
DTS: City Department of Transportation Services
DOT: State Department of Transportation
EIS: Environmental Impact Statement
EPA: Environmental Protection Agency
FTA: Federal Transit Administration
HPD: Honolulu Police Department
OMPO: Oahu Metropolitan Organization
OTS: Oahu Transit Services, a private company which operates *TheBus*