



From Vog to Smog

By Jamie Story, President

On May 29, Honolulu Mayor Mufi Hannemann issued a press release in praise of a Brookings Institution study that "underscores how important rail mass transit is to Honolulu's future." Among other things, the Mayor remarked that "This important study makes it clear that we are moving down the right path with our rail transit project."

The next time Mr. Hannemann promotes a piece of research from a liberal think tank, he should read it more carefully first.

The Brookings Institution ranked the largest 100 United States metro areas in terms of carbon emissions per capita. However, the Institution only included highway transportation and residential energy consumption. Emissions from commercial buildings, industry, or non-highway transportation were excluded-and as pointed out by the local media, these account for roughly half of carbon emissions nationally.

It is no surprise that cities with rail transit would fare well in the study when-surprise!-emissions from rail transit systems were not taken into account. Environmentalists (and those who blindly follow them) treat mass transit, and in particular light rail, as a panacea for environmental woes, real or imagined. However, scientific research proves otherwise.

A University of Hawaii study led by Dr. Panos Prevedouros found that the Mayor's rail system would only reduce traffic congestion by three percent. The light rail system itself would actually consume more energy and produce more emissions than the marginal number of cars it helps to replace. He contrasts this "19th century polluting technology" with modern-day cars, which get more and more efficient as technology advances. The Toyota Prius emits half the amount of carbon per passenger mile as the average rail system.

The Mayor's mass transit plan would have a negative effect on Hawaii's environment, yet the Brookings Institution failed to take these types of emissions into account in its recent study. I guess those observations didn't fit its agenda.

Upon a close read of the Brookings study, one also discovers that it never claims a correlation between rail transit and lower carbon emissions. The authors optimistically state that "many metro areas with small per capita carbon footprints also have sizable rail transit ridership," and then cite four examples. However, they follow by saying, "Washington, Baltimore, and Atlanta also have high rail ridership, but they do not follow the same pattern, as they have substantially larger than average carbon footprints."

This observation supports Dr. Prevedouros's findings that rail transit does not automatically reduce carbon emissions. In fact, in some cases it may exacerbate the problem.

Since Mayor Hannemann is such a big fan of the Brookings study, one must wonder if he agrees with its other recommendations. For example, the authors state that "the federal government has not resolved underpriced energy," implying that Congress should do what it can to drive energy prices even higher. Besides Mr. Hannemann, I don't know of many Hawaii residents who would agree that energy is "underpriced" after filling up their tanks at more than \$4 a gallon.

There is one bright piece of news from the Brookings study: Honolulu is ranked number one in the country in terms of lowest carbon emissions per capita. We are blessed with a beautiful climate in which to walk and ride bicycles and in which non-air conditioned living is comfortable. And while we complain about the traffic-and rightly so-the fact that we live on an island greatly limits the number of miles we drive. (continued)

So what is the answer to our traffic problems? Dr. Prevedouros has clearly modeled this in his research. High Occupancy Toll (or HOT) lanes, combined with necessary upgrades to roads, traffic signals, and the bus system, would resolve ten times more congestion than rail- and at a fraction of the cost of the Mayor's \$6 billion train.

Contrary to Mayor Hannemann's claims, rail would not solve our traffic woes here in Honolulu-and could harm our fragile environment in the process.

Jamie Story is President of the Grassroot Institute of Hawaii. A shorter version of this commentary was published by the Honolulu Advertiser on June 9, 2008. The full commentary was also published as "From VOG to SMOG: Rail Transit's Impact on Hawaii's Air" in Hawaii Reporter on June 11, 2008 and is available at <http://hawaiireporter.com/story.aspx?8d4553a3-795e-4740-b0ce-abe2a8d0c505>

Dr. Panos Prevedouros' study "Transportation Alternatives Analysis for Mitigating Traffic Congestion between Leeward Oahu and Honolulu" can be found at <http://www.eng.hawaii.edu/~panos/UHCS.pdf>. A two page summary of the study, "Bumper to Bumper on the H-1", published by the Grassroot Institute is available at http://www.grassrootinstitute.org/Publications/PolicyBrief_1000.pdf