

The Public Purpose

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SLOGANEERING HAWAII MAYORS SELL TRANSIT BLATHER

By Wendell Cox

The Associated Press story could have come from just about anywhere....

Ensuring that residents don't have to use their cars just to get to a grocery store or a movie would do more to ease traffic congestion than building more roads or widening highways, island mayors said yesterday.

They urged better community planning to keep offices, essential shopping and entertainment centers nearer homes.

"If we focus on improving infrastructure -- roads, highways -- I think we are doomed for failure. ... We will never catch up,"

So said island of Hawaii Mayor Harry Kim at a recent conference of Hawaiian mayors. He could not have been more wrong. Indeed, the doctors who bled George Washington to death attempting to cure his final illness had a better sense of the problem they were dealing with.

In fact, it is not the trip to the grocery store or the movie that is the problem. These trips largely occur at times that are less congestion. It is rather the peak period trip, during which time people travel all over Honolulu and Hilo for school, jobs and other purposes.

Before the mayors spend too much money on terminal transit projects and waste too much time allowing traffic to outstrip highway supply, they should perhaps take a tour of the places where their vision works. It will need to be a world tour, because there are no examples in the United States. No US urban area has a transit system that provides automobile competitive mobility except for a small percentage of trips, all to the core or within the core. And, as for providing jobs near houses, I wonder if Mayor Kim works at any of the employment locations closest to his house --- say the local gas station or video rental store? Same problem everywhere. There are a whole lot of reasons people live a long way from work, and the lack of close-by work is not one of them.

There'll be no point in including Canada on the tour, because things aren't that better there. One has a better chance of getting around Kona by transit than the Toronto suburbs, where most of the people live. Cross out Western Europe as well. There, despite

the perception by people who visit the historical cores for touristic purposes, the car is king. Just try to get from suburb to suburb in a reasonable time by transit in say, Stockholm, Paris, Barcelona, Copenhagen or Paris. We're back to Kona.

There are some places to look in Asia, which is the only place anyone need go. Transit market shares are still high in Tokyo and Osaka, though a large percentage of trips cannot be made by automobile-competitive transit. Part of the reason transit shares are higher there is that automobile ownership is much less, incomes are less and transit retains a high market share largely by virtue of the fact that people don't get out as much.

But there is one place the mayors should go to see a transit system that works – Hong Kong. There, the 150,000 people per square mile provide the critical mass that makes automobile competitive transit a reality. The message is simple for Honolulu and Oahu. Pile everyone on top of one another into a space approximately the size of Honolulu International Airport and Hickham Air Force Base.

But don't think that will do it alone. Even in Hong Kong, the Mayor doesn't work at the nearby gas station. The average Hong Konger travels five miles each way to work, passing closer employment opportunities. Some so close that they are passed before the descent down the apartment house stairs begins.



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