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Honolulu Hopeful Has No-Track Mind

Desire to Kill Urban Rail Project Draws Former Governor Into Race for Mayor

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By JIM CARLTON

HONOLULU—The leading mayoral candidate in Hawaii's capital wants to derail plans for the state's first urban rail system, just as major construction is set to begin.



Honolulu Authority for Rapid Transportation A groundbreaking ceremony for the Honolulu rail system was held last year in Kapolei.

For 40 years, city planners have pushed for a rail system here to alleviate traffic on Oahu, Hawaii's most populated island. In 2008, city voters endorsed a 20-mile elevated system now estimated to cost \$5.2 billion. Construction on the project's elevated portions is scheduled to begin in March.

But former Gov. Ben Cayetano's unexpected entry into the Honolulu mayor's race could throw a wrench into what would be one of the largest transit

projects in the U.S., at a time when other rail projects around the country are also under fire.

Mr. Cayetano, a Democrat, says he joined the race in January specifically to kill the project. If he wins, he says, "I will pull the plug on rail." It isn't clear if he could actually kill the project if elected, though he certainly could create obstacles.

Honolulu's layout—with most of its 950,000 residents living along a narrow, 20-mile-long coastal swath—creates frequent gridlock along Interstate H-1. The rail proposal, which has roots dating back to 1968, was championed by Mufi Hannemann during his 2004-10 stint as mayor. "Once you build it, people will say 'Why did it take so long?'" said Mr. Hannemann, now running for a congressional seat on Oahu.

The system would feature light-rail trains of the sort used in cities like San Francisco, moving on an elevated track to



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Robert Kay

Mayoral candidate Ben Cayetano opposes the plan.

21 stations from western Oahu to the central Honolulu waterfront. By 2030, transit officials envision it carrying 116,300 passengers each weekday, paying the same fares as for city buses. It is slated to partially open in 2015 and be fully operational by 2019.

But Mr. Cayetano says the rail line would mar Honolulu's picturesque waterfront while diverting money needed to fix aging sewer and water facilities. And the 72-year-old is a formidable opponent: He has never lost a campaign for public office, winning eight state races that culminated in two terms as Hawaii's governor, from 1994 to 2002.

The potential troubles for the Honolulu plan come as other high-profile rail projects have run into obstacles. Last year, Florida's Republican governor, Rick Scott, announced he would reject federal

funds from the Obama administration for a high-speed rail project, while in California a planned bullet train from Southern California to the Bay Area has run into funding uncertainties.

Mr. Cayetano faces Mayor Peter Carlisle, a former Republican who is now an independent, and former acting Mayor Kirk Caldwell, a Democrat, in a primary election Aug. 11. A poll released Feb. 13 by Ward Research Inc., a nonpartisan research firm, showed Mr. Cayetano with 44% support from registered voters in the nonpartisan race, compared with 35% for Mr. Carlisle and 16% for Mr. Caldwell.



Enlarge Image

"He has a perfect record in running for office with a lot of experience and name recognition," says Neal Milner, political-science professor emeritus at the University of Hawaii. After their 2008 approval of a rail project, voters in 2010 approved a public transit authority to oversee construction and operation of the system. On Feb. 6, the Federal Transit

Administration gave the project the green light to move forward with construction. So far, Honolulu has received about \$120 million of \$1.55 billion in federal funds slated for the project. Other funding would come from a half-percent surcharge on the local excise and use tax on business receipts and imported goods.

"We're past the stage of debate on this project," said Donald Horner, chairman of the Honolulu Authority for Rapid Transportation and retired chief executive of First Hawaiian Bank. He says rail would take 40,000 cars off the road daily.

Mr. Cayetano and other opponents disagree. They say voters approved the measures believing rail would reduce traffic congestion, though city projections show congestion will worsen with or without the project. City officials say it will reduce congestion in the future, and congestion would be much worse without the rail system. "If we do nothing, we will have gridlock," said Toru Hamasayu, interim executive director of the city's rail authority.

Mr. Cayetano and seven other anti-rail plaintiffs filed suit May 11, 2011, in U.S. district court in Honolulu against the FTA and city, seeking an order to halt the project on grounds environmental reviews were invalid. The defendants denied the allegations; the case is pending.

Mr. Cayetano says that over the year-end holidays he lit on a new strategy: stop rail by becoming mayor. "I didn't want to run for mayor, but couldn't get anybody else" to run

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with the intent of stopping rail, he said. "My wife said, 'You'd better do it because if you don't you will be miserable the rest of your life.' "

Lacking the establishment support he enjoyed during much of his political career, Mr. Cayetano is aiming for grass-roots appeal such as by speaking to community groups and enlisting volunteers to make calls to potential supporters. As he spoke recently at a diner in east Honolulu, a patron, David Von Hamm, approached to shake hands. "I think you've got an excellent chance, good luck," said Mr. Von Hamm, a 48-year-old charter-boat captain who criticized rail as "being rammed down our throats."

Mr. Cayetano's mayoral-race opponents say his singular focus on the rail project will hurt him. "This election is about so much more," said Mr. Caldwell, Honolulu's appointed mayor from July through October 2010, in a statement. "It's about the buses that take people to and from their jobs...it's about protecting people and their property, filling potholes and repaving their roads."

"I think it definitely will be a battle," says Mr. Carlisle, elected in 2010 to serve the remainder of a term vacated when Mr. Hannemann stepped down to run for governor. (He lost to former U.S. Rep. Neil Abercrombie.)

With more than \$2 billion in rail construction already under contract and as many as 17,000 jobs on the line, Mr. Carlisle says, Mr. Cayetano would hurt Honolulu's economy if he derailed rail. "This will be the biggest stimulus project ever in the state of Hawaii," the mayor says.

Mr. Cayetano says completion of rail would be worse. "If I'm elected, we will do the process right and look at other alternatives," such as an express bus system, he says. "I don't believe in throwing good money after bad."

Write to Jim Carlton at jim.carlton@wsj.com

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