

# MASS TRANSIT

## HI: Ahead in 2020: First rail segment to open by the end of year

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Jan. 1--If all goes according to plan, the first segment at the Ewa end of Honolulu's \$9.2 billion rail line will open to the public by the end of 2020, a major milestone for a troubled project that has been dogged by years of delays and billions of dollars in cost overruns.

But by now Honolulu taxpayers know things often don't go according to plan for the Honolulu Authority for Rapid Transportation. The rail authority made some bold predictions for 2019 that fell flat, and construction is behind schedule on some components of the 11-mile segment that is supposed to open by the end of December.

According to a consultant that monitors the Honolulu project for the Federal Transit Administration, there is no "float" in the schedule for the interim opening, meaning there is no time to spare for any new delays leading up to this year's scheduled opening of the segment of rail line from East Kapolei to Aloha Stadium.

Yet construction on some of the nine stations in that first segment is running behind schedule, and a platform design change late in the development of the Aloha Stadium station may force the rail authority to

exclude it from the opening of the first segment, according to consultant Hill International Inc.

Still, rail spokesman Bill Brennan said in a written statement that "this is the year." Construction will be finished in 2020 on the Ewa end of the 20-mile rail line, and that portion of the system will be "ready to ride " by this time next year, he said.

The rail project made significant progress in 2019, and HART now calculates the entire line with 21 stations is 53 % finished. But there were setbacks along the way.

For example, all of the finished train cars were scheduled to be delivered to the rail authority by the end of 2019 under the city's contract with Ansaldo Honolulu JV--now called Hitachi Rail Honolulu JV--but that didn't happen.

The rail cars had to be retrofitted after failing a fire resistance test, and HART now expects the six retrofitted trains that will be needed for the interim opening won't all reach Honolulu until the end of May.

HART had also hoped the spigot of federal funding for rail would be open once again in 2019, but that didn't work out, either.

The FTA in 2012 pledged to provide \$1.55 billion to help fund the rail system, and so far has delivered more than \$800 million of that. But the FTA hasn't released any new funding to HART since 2014 because it wants to see a rail "recovery plan " that demonstrates the city can complete the project with the available state, federal and city funds.

Now the latest HART projection is the FTA will release additional funding sometime after February.

The issue that continues to block the federal funding stream is the outcome of a complex procurement process that was supposed to be finished in 2019, but wasn't.

The rail authority is soliciting proposals for a public-private partnership or P3 contract to finish the last 4.1 miles of elevated track and eight train stations in urban Honolulu, and also build a 1, 600-stall parking garage and transit center at Pearl Highlands.

That construction work is expected to cost about \$1.4 billion, and the winning bidder in the P3 competition would also maintain and operate the entire rail line for 30 years. That operating portion of the contract will likely be worth another \$4 billion in the decades ahead.

The original target date for awarding the P3 contract was Sept. 30, 2019, but that deadline has been pushed back three times. The new official award date is Feb. 23, but HART Executive Director Andrew Robbins has said the contract may not be actually be awarded until later in the year.

The federal government is closely watching as that process plays out. The FTA wants to ensure the new P3 contract will allow the city to actually complete rail at an affordable price, and has delayed any additional federal funding until it is clear the P3 approach will work.

And looming in the background this year will be an ongoing federal investigation of rail that was first made public more than a year ago. Federal grand jury subpoenas have been issued to current and former HART employees, but it is unclear exactly what the focus of the investigation may be.

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