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## Long transit battle likely

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Start small. Get a high-profile leader, preferably not a politician. Be prepared to stay the course.

Those are the things Honolulu needs to do if it hopes to see its latest push for mass transit become a reality, according to transit experts nationwide.

Without those things, officials say, the new rapid-transit proposal in the early stages of planning could end up just like three previous large-scale projects: expensive dead ends.

"I can sum up the pitfalls in three words: cost, confusion and ignorance," said Dave Dobbs, head of the Texas Association for Public Transportation and publisher of Light Rail Now! "Nothing about public transportation projects is ever straight ahead. You need a strategy to keep moving forward."

With a dedicated source of transit money already approved by lawmakers, the city's plans to link West O'ahu and urban Hono-lulu by rail already have cleared one of the big obstacles that helped doom earlier proposals, supporters said.

But key political, economic and environmental problems still could derail the project at certain points in what might be a decade-long process, according to experts surveyed from Seattle to Texas, where transit plans are in various stages of development.

"There are going to be a lot of battles and hurdles ahead. The communities that succeed in getting projects completed are the ones that know how to overcome those problems," said Art Guzzetti, director of policy and advocacy for the American Public Transportation Association, which represents mass-transit agencies nationwide.

Honolulu lawmakers this year approved a tax increase to finance mass-transit improvements and signed a \$9.7 million contract to study mass-transit alternatives along the western spine of O'ahu. Consultants are now gathering information about potential costs, routes and other details and plan to present the first glimpse of the proposal in public hearings set for December.

But we've been down this road before. Three times since the 1980s, city officials have gotten through similar initial stages of a mass-transit project, only to have them fall apart because of a change of political will or administration.

"That's not unusual. There are a lot of cases where cities have overcome initial opposition from voters or politicians and gone on to build successful rail lines," Guzzetti said. "Phoenix, Denver, San Diego. They've all been through initial rejections. Each time, though, they gained information and went back to

the voters to get it through."

Seattle residents already have been asked to vote at least three times on a proposal to extend an existing one-mile tourist-oriented monorail into a 14-mile commuter line. Last month, with the first construction months away, city officials again withdrew support, citing concerns about increasing costs. The citizens group pushing for monorail responded by moving to put a less expensive 10-mile plan on the election ballot again next month.

With an estimated construction cost of \$2.1 billion, the monorail plan's costs are similar to a light rail system being sought in Honolulu, but opponents in Seattle zeroed in on a recent report that shows financing costs over the next 50 years could total \$11 billion.

"That changed the whole discussion. It became a political football. You can learn from us and focus on the construction costs and emphasize the long-term values to the community, too," said Natasha Jones, communications manager for the Seattle project. Honolulu officials have not yet come up with a detailed cost estimate of the latest proposal or a detailed financing plan.

They have admitted, though, that the \$150 million a year to be generated by the half-percentage-point increase in the state's general excise tax might not be enough to fully cover construction of a line that might eventually run for 24 miles. If necessary, the city will start by building a portion of the line and seek to expand it later, Mayor Mufi Hannemann has said.

That's also not unusual in other cities, officials said.

"The key is to get something going. If you build it right, you can set things up to expand later," Dobbs said. "Once people can see something up and running, they can get the idea of how it works, and then it's a lot easier to grow. You've just got to start with something that works."

In Portland, Ore., which rail supporters here often point to as a model for how Honolulu might proceed, the first modern transit improvement was an old-fashioned streetcar, Dobbs said.

"It doesn't have all the sophisticated intricacies of light rail, but it does have an excellent ride and helped get the ball rolling there," he said.

From that beginning in the 1980s, Portland has expanded its service to include three light rails that include 44 miles of track and 64 stations. Ridership has grown every year for the past 16 years and now tops 97,000 trips each weekday, officials said. Planning for a fourth line is under way.

Portland also has had several prominent rail champions, something that can be critical to success. Well-known community leader Dr. Lawrence Griffith led the effort to bring back historic trolleys to Portland, and U.S. Rep. Earl Blumenauer, D-Ore., has been a leading advocate of transit financing in Congress.

"But it doesn't have to be an individual champion," Guzzetti said. "Sometimes it's better to have a core of people who won't be denied. The projects that are most successful all have someone with the will and staying power to keep pushing things along."

Often it's better if the champion isn't a politician, said Dobbs, who lives in Austin, Texas, where one of the leading proponents of light rail is Lee Walker, the enormously popular former chief executive officer of Dell Computers.

"The next election is always a problem. The best thing is to find someone who has community respect but doesn't have to worry about being elected," Dobbs said.

Rail opponents have developed similar strategies, said one of the nation's leading critics of transit projects.

"The whole process is absolutely corrupt and fallacious," said Wendell Cox, a former transit planner turned consultant who says all large-scale transportation projects should be curtailed.

"The basic problem is that Congress keeps making money available for these projects, and very powerful political interests keep spending it," he said. "Knowledge, facts and reason stand little chance of fighting those interests, but you have to keep trying. There are a lot of cases where referendums have forced a halt to some projects, but they keep coming back."

Cox says rail opponents also need to find a champion and stay the course. He praised Cliff Slater, a longtime foe of Hono-lulu's transit projects, for continuing to educate the public about problems in transportation financing. "I'm proud of what he's been able to do," Cox said.

"You have to get involved in the public input process and keep working at it. You have to show that transit projects never give the best return on their investment. You have to figure out a way to make the politicians get the best return on their money," he said.

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