

The former governor opposes the city's rail transit project

By Kevin Dayton



Former Democratic Gov. Ben Cayetano says he is considering running for Honolulu mayor this year, citing concerns that Honolulu rail transit is far too expensive, and is being "rammed down people's throats."

Cayetano, 72, acknowledged that time is short and raising money for a bid for the mayor's office may be a challenge, but said he has come from behind in almost every election in his 28 years in political office.

"If I enter, I enter to win. I've never lost an election, because that's always been my attitude," Cayetano said.

He said people have been urging him to run.

"I understand how strongly some people feel about it, but I gotta think about what it takes to go through that again," he said.

If he decides to run, Cayetano would face incumbent Honolulu Mayor Peter

Carlisle, who is a strong supporter of the rail project. Cayetano's entry into the race could also set up a three-way contest between Cayetano, Carlisle and former City Managing Director Kirk Caldwell, who also supports rail.

Known as a scrappy maverick throughout his political career, Cayetano is a lawyer and the first Filipino-American ever elected governor. He has been largely out of the public eye since he served as governor from 1994 to 2002.

However, Cayetano recently took on a somewhat higher-profile role as an outspoken opponent of the city's rail transit project.

He is part of the group, which includes longtime rail opponent Cliff Slater, former Hawaii Democratic Party Chairman Walter Heen and University of Hawaii law professor Randy Roth, that sued the city and the Federal Transit Administration to try to halt the rail project.



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Cayetano said the rail system overshadows all other issues in city government because of its sheer size. The official price tag for the 20-mile elevated line is \$5.27 billion, but Cayetano said two studies have predicted that cost overruns could push the final cost to \$7 billion.

"Add that cost to the \$5 billion the city has to spend for the (Environmental Protection Agency) sewer upgrades, and the hundreds of millions to bring our water system up to speed, and the city may either go bankrupt or raise taxes," Cayetano said. In 2010, the city pledged to make more than \$3.5 billion in improvements to its sewage treatment system under a deal with the Environmental Protection Agency.

"The point, I think, that has to be made about this project is it's going to affect everything else that the city has to do, or wants to do, and that's why the project is so critical," he said. "You look at it as one issue, but this one issue affects everything else."

Dan Boylan, a political analyst and retired University of Hawaii-West Oahu history professor, described rail as a "cutting-edge" issue with many voters. He believes it is possible for a candidate of Cayetano's caliber to succeed where other anti-rail candidates, such as University of Hawaii engineering professor Panos Prevedouros, have not.

"Ben's got an awful lot of experience," Boylan said. "People always underestimate Ben. They have in every election he's run in. But I think he has a shot."

As a former two-term governor, Cayetano can credibly speak to a broader set of city and state issues than rail. He also has name recognition and a track record with voters that other potential contenders do not.

While the mayor's race is nonpartisan, and Carlisle has distanced himself from his Republican past, Cayetano has strong ties to a network of prominent Democrats that could provide a counterweight to the many establishment and labor-connected Democrats who will likely prefer Carlisle because of Carlisle's support for rail.

Rather than build rail, Cayetano said, he wants to focus on fixing Honolulu's aging water and sewer infrastructure. He said he favors an enhanced bus system with dedicated lanes to speed bus traffic because buses in a dedicated lane "will beat the train all the time."

Building dedicated bus lanes across Oahu would require close coordination between the state and the city, and "I can talk to the governor," Cayetano said. Cayetano and Gov. Neil Abercrombie are longtime political allies dating back to their years together in the state Senate.

As for the jobs that would be created by the rail project, Cayetano said: "Jobs? Tell that to the 1,000 workers who lost their jobs when two hospitals went bankrupt. If we want to create jobs, (let's) build new schools, renovate old ones, build public housing, (which will create) jobs we know will go to local construction workers."

Star-Advertiser reporter Derrick DePledge contributed to this report.