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Hawaii News

Charter proposals to halt rail rejected

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The Honolulu City Charter Commission voted Wednesday to set aside proposals submitted by the public aimed at either stopping or shortening the route of the city's contentious 20-mile, \$6.57 billion rail project.

All told, the commission received 154 proposals for charter amendments from government officials, interest groups, private individuals and its own commission members. (See accompanying chart at staradvertiser.com.)

With a Sept. 1 deadline to submit charter amendment proposals to the city clerk in time to be placed on the Nov. 8 general election ballot, the commission has limited time and myriad issues, Chairman David Rae said after the meeting.

On Wednesday, the commission voted to defer 15 of the proposals, including three plans seeking to either tear down the partially built rail line, or to halt the project either at Aloha Stadium or Middle Street, rather than the now-planned Ala Moana station, and eliminating the Honolulu Authority for Rapid Transportation.

Rae and several others said the electorate had previously voted on rail, and raised concerns that either tearing down or shortening the length may be considered a breach of the city's agreement with the Federal Transit Administration that provides \$1.55 billion of the project's funding.

"That's not something I am prepared to do, or recommend we do," Rae told colleagues.

The City Council, separately, is in the process of deciding whether to extend a half-percent general excise tax on Oahu, the main revenue source for rail construction, in the wake of recent financial shortfalls.

Several commission members said they empathize with the concerns of several private individuals who argued that all the proposals should be given a more thorough vetting before being rejected.

But Rae said it's possible for any of the deferred proposals to be discussed, if members choose to do so later.

The smattering of proposals given the preliminary rejection slip fell into several categories.

Commission member John Waihee, the former governor, said he doesn't want the commission "being used as a cheap route to have a referendum." He cited votes by the public on rail and rail funding among them.

A brief digest of all 154 Charter Commission proposals can be found at data.staradvertiser.com/charter/

Rae noted that the commission is continuing to look at other rail-related proposals, including ones that would create a new agency responsible for operation and management of all city-sponsored transportation modes including rail, TheBus and Handi-Van.

Most of the other proposals deferred are defined, in either state or city law, as the jurisdiction of other government agencies or officials, Rae said. Those proposals are being referred to the responsible agencies, he said.

One example of that was a proposal calling for genetically modified products on Oahu to be labeled as "genetically modified organisms." Commission members said the courts have ruled such a law is outside the jurisdiction of the counties.

Also rejected were several proposals calling for eliminating the mayor's position in favor of a city manager under the auspices of the City Council. Rae said that contemplating a significant overhaul of the city governing structure, while within the commission's jurisdiction, was something the panel would not have time to investigate thoroughly given other priorities and decided not to consider.

A handful of people testified at Wednesday's meeting.

Retired librarian Joyce Solomon spoke in support of a charter amendment requiring greater public access to the city's Municipal Reference Center, including language requiring it to be open at least once a week. Solomon said the facility and service have been neglected in the last two decades.

Lea Hong of the Trust for Public Land and Marjorie Ziegler of the Conservation Council for Hawai'i urged the commission to reject an amendment eliminating the Clean Water and Natural Lands Fund, which provides money to community groups seeking to preserve undeveloped lands. A 2006 charter amendment approved by voters requires one-half of 1 percent of property tax revenues go to the fund.

Barbara Polk of Common Cause Hawaii called for the commission to continue discussion on adding language to the charter requiring the city clerk to participate in "get out the vote" efforts and to provide "plain English" guides to voters on candidates and issues.

The commission, which has been meeting in the City Council's committee room, intends to hold at least four meetings outside Honolulu Hale, Rae said. After meeting with city attorneys to discuss format issues at its next meeting Wednesday, the commission will begin airing the remaining 139 proposals in groups divided by related subject matter, he said.

Last week's meeting was the first to be televised live on 'Olelo Community Media Channel 54 on Oceanic Time Warner Cable channel 54 and olelo.org. Rae said the commission is hoping to broadcast most of its meetings but may be precluded from showing them all due to budget constraints.