

FEATURES

Stuart Scott, Pearl Johnson and Lois Lee, members of the Environmental Coalition of Hawaii steering group

IMAGE: TOM COFFMAN

Challenging the member polling process on Rail

BY STUART SCOTT | SEP 12, 2012

In my last op-ed (“I dissent,” Aug. 8) I challenged the Sierra Club to properly poll us, its members, on what I called “Big Rail.” I telephoned Anthony Aalto, chair of the Sierra Club Oahu Group’s Executive Committee, to request a poll. Mr. Aalto replied that the club had already conducted one in April 2012, which had been announced to Oahu membership by two emails and one ad in the monthly newsletter. He reported having received around a hundred responses, evenly divided between “for” and “against.” Apparently the executive committee felt justified in formulating its own position and presenting it as the Sierra Club’s position.

I did not remember receiving either of those emails. I searched my inbox for [sierraclubhawaii.com], the address of the purported original survey, confirming I had not received them. I discussed this with other members. Only one remembered receiving the emails. At my request, Aalto forwarded his email, dated April 29, 2012. It read:

“In the next few weeks the Executive Committee of the Oahu Group will be interviewing the three Honolulu mayoral candidates before making our endorsement. Clearly the issue of the HART rail project will be one of the central issues in the race. It would help us a great deal in making our decision if a significant number of you were to tell us how you feel about rail. Please take a moment to fill out our short poll at: [sierraclubhawaii.com]”

I cannot assert conclusively that the executive committee merely pretended to alert its entire membership to the survey. But I can assert, as a former college instructor of statistics, that if two separate emails had indeed been sent to nearly 4,000 Oahu Group members, and that if only one among a half-dozen a friend and I contacted had received them, the statistical probability of this being an accident would be next to nil.

As I delved further, more disturbing information emerged. Jim Hayes was a member of Sierra Club executive committee from 2009–2011, and its chair for one term. Hayes has for 20 years been employed by Parsons Brinckerhoff, the engineering firm that has so far received rail contracts in the neighborhood of \$400 million. Hayes held Sierra Club Oahu Group Executive Committee meetings in Parsons Brinckerhoff conference rooms, according to an attendee who wishes to remain anonymous. I believe this was the origin of a conflict of interest that has endured ever since. Hayes is challenging Ann Kobayashi, a strong opponent of Big Rail, for her City Council seat, using “green” yard signs.

The executive committee chair who immediately preceded Aalto was Willis Moore. Moore is constantly pressuring the Oahu Group to support Big Rail. On May 22, 2012, only weeks after ending his year as chair, Moore testified to the State Land Use Commission in favor of building the Hoopili subdivision on highly productive farmlands along Big Rail’s path. This was in complete opposition to the Sierra Club’s position. Moore, who calls himself “Tusitala,” a nom de plume of Robert Louis Stevenson, is also pressuring executive director Robert Harris to back the mayoral candidacy of Kirk Caldwell, the poster child for Big Rail (notice the green shading in his posters), as evidenced by emails copied to a fellow club member.

I find this extremely odd, since Caldwell’s only environmental record is his role in legislation exempting the Superferry from an Environmental Impact Statement (EIS), in an attempt to circumvent the court order resulting from a lawsuit brought by none other than the Sierra Club! Caldwell’s only other environmental identity derives from his two-year stint as Mayor Mufi Hannemann’s managing director and then Acting Mayor. Since Sierra Club opposed the Superferry and crusaded fervently against Hannemann due to his terrible environmental record, how dare Moore pressure the club to jump on the Caldwell Express?

In late June of this year, a resolution in support of Rail by the Oahu Group Executive Committee was leaked to the press. I believe this action was taken by one frustrated pro-Rail member in response to a Sierra Club block on public release of that resolution due to Hawaii Chapter rules. Big Rail's forces have a long reach into odd places. The claim that the Sierra Club is a supporter of Big Rail is based on the personal positions of Hayes, Moore, Aalto and another executive committee member, James Anthony, whom I watched railroading the opposition at a meeting Aug. 28. When the Sierra Club commented on Big Rail's EIS in February, 2008, it recited all the criticisms of the elevated heavy rail system—its negative visual impact, cost, the likelihood of urban sprawl along the rail line and destruction of agricultural lands. With these concerns, how could the the executive committee say Sierra Club is for Rail?

Let's wake up to the undermining of democracy in the Sierra Club, whose endorsement of Big Rail represents the positions of a few key members. Surely the Sierra Club has too great a legacy to put at risk in an environmental train wreck.

The writer is a member of SCOG and the Environmental Coalition of Hawaii ([ecoHawaii.us]).