



Tough-talking Cayetano takes aim at rail officials

POSTED: 01:30 a.m. HST, Mar 13, 2012

StarAdvertiser.com

-- ADVERTISEMENT --

-- ADVERTISEMENT --

The people of Honolulu, former Gov. Ben Cayetano says, "don't like being conned."

Claiming that the city has not explained either the true cost or real impact of its heavy-rail transit program, Cayetano is running for mayor to stop the program.

The Hawaii Poll taken a month ago has Cayetano with 44 percent of the vote in a three-way race against current Mayor Peter Carlisle and former acting Mayor Kirk Caldwell. Since then other polls have Cayetano at more than 50 percent.

It is Cayetano's blunt, no-sugar-on-top approach that is fueling his eye-opening rise in the polls.

At a breakfast interview last week, Cayetano talked about his effort. He acknowledged that his pledge to halt the current rail project is a central part of the campaign, but he was quick to explain that the real issue is clear and effective leadership for Honolulu.

Cayetano joked that one of his campaign advisers says the story of Honolulu's rail system is "the silence of the leaders," as he charges that the present plan sprung up without proper study or approval.

Cayetano is returning to the public arena after a decade in retirement. The former state legislator spent 16 years on the Capitol's top floor, the first eight as lieutenant governor and another eight as governor.

Now in his new campaign, Cayetano has linked up with allies, some of whom during his previous political life would have been enemies.

First, Cayetano and others filed a federal lawsuit claiming that the rail project had not been properly examined. Cayetano joined with former judge Walter Heen, law school professor Randy Roth and transit critic Cliff Slater. Heen is a Democrat. Roth is a conservative Republican and senior adviser to former Gov. Linda Lingle.

During the preparation for the trial, Cayetano learned something.

"You find yourself working with guys like Randy; you find he is just as dedicated to the public interest in supporting Lingle. He is just as dedicated as anyone else.

"Whatever happens, I will walk away from this with my respect for all of them," Cayetano said.

If Cayetano has mellowed in thinking about others on the political stage, he is somewhat less than "Gentle Ben" when it comes to those running the city's transit plan.

Cayetano worries that the city will rush to start construction before either his court case is heard or the mayor's election is held. If he wins either or both, rail will be sidetracked, he promised, but the city will be left with a project unfinished and unwanted.

"These people in HART (Honolulu Area Rapid Transit) took an oath that they would do what is best for the city," Cayetano said.

"One of the first things I'm going to do if elected, I'm going to talk to the city attorneys — first of all to hold these guys accountable for malfeasance. You are not doing the right thing if you give contracts for things you don't have money for," he said.

"I am going to look for some sanction against these people because what they have done, I think, is totally irresponsible."

What voters and others want, Cayetano said, is leadership. His longtime political ally Gov. Neil Abercrombie says much the same.

Asked last week to handicap the mayor's race, Abercrombie predicted the vote will not turn on the issue of rail.

Those favoring the transit plan will be either for Caldwell or Carlisle, and those against rail will side with Cayetano, he said.

"I don't think it will be an issue for 25 seconds. To the degree people vote on something other than rail, the person picked will be the one that people decide is the best leader," Abercrombie said, adding that people should not discount Cayetano's decades of experience as a state leader.

Those opposing Cayetano will also find that at 72, Cayetano is more capable than most to find a way not to lose.

Richard Borreca writes on politics on Sundays, Tuesdays and Fridays. Reach him at rborreca@staradvertiser.com.

