



# WORKING TOGETHER FOR PROGRESS

## Honolulu Rail Project brings new hope to multi-generational families

BY RYAN NG

In 2008, the citizens of Honolulu approved a new high-capacity rail line along the city's scenic coastline between Kapolei and Ala Moana Center. With a promise of quick public transportation along what is among the most congested corridors in the nation, the project would benefit Oahu's nearly one million residents as well as its many visitors.

Deemed the largest public works project ever to be undertaken in the state of Hawaii, the \$5.2 billion, 20-mile project broke ground in 2011. Backed by a steady source of local revenues, including a dedicated 0.5 percent surcharge on the state general excise tax, roughly one-third of the cost is expected to be covered by a federal capital grant.

The project received a Federal Transit Authority (FTA) Record of Decision in early 2010, giving the project team authorization to acquire more than 200 properties. The project required the relocation of 25

residential households, one non-profit and 66 business establishments along the alignment. More than \$200 million was budgeted for the acquisition and relocation.

Nearly all of the residential relocations were located in an area known locally as the Banana Patch, a name that stemmed from its agricultural use during Hawaii's sugar plantation era. While still zoned for agriculture, the community was sandwiched between several major highways and shrouded in dense riparian vegetation. A fair number of the residents grew vegetables and fruits on small garden plots, and it was not uncommon to see goats, pigs and chickens roaming the lands.

Prior to forming the Honolulu Authority for Rapid Transportation (HART), the City's Rapid Transit Division was tasked with acquiring the right of way needed, with assistance from other departments.

## CHALLENGES OF RELOCATION

The living arrangements in the Banana Patch were often difficult to ascertain, as many family members lived together under one dwelling. In one instance, there were as many as five separate households living under one roof. To understand the lifestyle of multi-generational living, one must understand the Hawaiian notion of *ohana*, or family.

Dating back to the days of old Hawaii, the *ohana* is the nucleus of Hawaiian culture that refers to one's extended family that goes beyond blood relatives. In the spirit of *ohana*, resources were pooled to help augment the overall finances of the families living under one roof. It has filtered down to modern day living on the islands where the younger generations rely on the older generations for financial and moral support. And as family members age, it is the duty of the younger generation to care for them. This practice has manifested itself in the Banana Patch, where the younger generations may live rent free, but in turn participate in paying for utilities, food and caring for elderly parents.

## REPLACING SUBSTANDARD DWELLINGS

Many of the existing dwellings within the Banana Patch were modest at best, and it

was not uncommon to see a commercial storage container or an abandoned bus being used as living quarters.

The area is also located in a floodplain, and the residents did not receive basic public services, such as water and sewer. Instead, they relied on artesian wells and cesspools. Nevertheless, the residents understandably had an innate attachment to their homes. Many were reluctant to move because their families had lived there for several generations. When interviewed by HART relocation agents, many of the residents preferred to stick together as an *ohana* rather than move away on their own. Given the number of family members living under one roof in many of these situations, the residents required larger, more expensive replacement dwellings, which in most cases, were beyond their financial reach.

## INTERVIEWING THE RESIDENTS

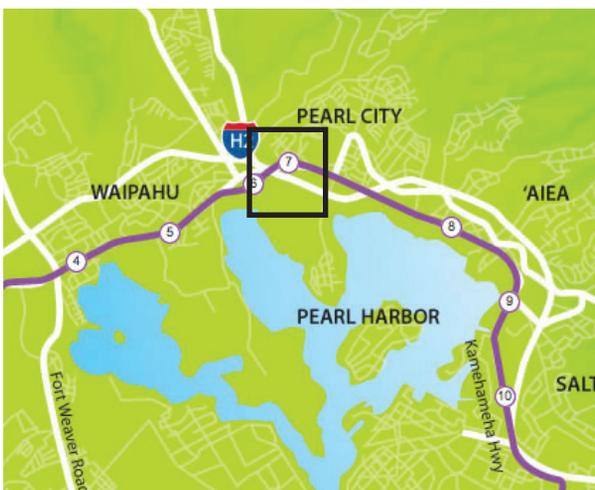
For the project to be delivered on time and with the right cultural sensitivity reflective of Oahu's island community, the Banana Patch was viewed as critical to the team's success. Formal relocation interviews were conducted with the residents to identify their needs, and their socio-economic concerns were apparent from the outset. Many of the residents lacked sufficient

employment opportunities and would be unable to afford replacement dwellings that fit their needs. Since real estate prices in Hawaii are some of the highest in the nation, the relocation team needed to conduct a very broad search to find comparable replacement properties that were affordable.

The project team understood from the beginning that simply relocating a family to a new home was not enough. They also wanted to ensure that the residents could sustain their lifestyle and eventually become financially self-sufficient. The notion of *kokua* guided the team as it progressed through the relocation process. The Hawaiian word *kokua* means to provide help and assistance. But more importantly, it embodies the local culture of wanting to genuinely help others with sensitivity and compassion.

"This was really a lifestyle change for the residents," said Karen Lee, Relocation Agent. "Many of them were not self-sufficient up until this point, but the relocation process forced them evaluate their lifestyle from jobs, finances and health, which ended up being a positive change agent."

Seeing first-hand how the relocation would impact an existing family structure



The relocation of the Banana Patch families has made way for the Pearl Highlands Station portion of the new rail project. Initial sections of the project are slated to open in 2015, and be fully operational by 2019.



and agricultural lifestyle, the team was able to use the FTA Programmatic Agreement to ensure each resident's unique lifestyle was recognized and respected. Through an executive order, the FTA designated the Banana Patch as an Environmental Justice Community. As such, the project would include special relocation considerations beyond the requirements of the Uniform Act. To that end, the project team was able to carefully balance the needs of the residents, while keeping a close eye on the budget.

Taking advantage of the outreach programs available, the team also employed the services of Helping Hands Hawaii, a local non-profit agency whose mission is to improve the quality of people's lives through the delivery of goods and services to those in need. Some of the services they provide include financial counseling, employment assistance, as well as loan programs and basic health services. The agency's services proved to be a vital resource for these families, providing a safety net of additional support.

"After reviewing the results of the relocation interviews with the residents, we felt it necessary to go above and beyond and engage the services of Helping Hands Hawaii, to provide the residents with much needed assistance," said Laura Ray, Right of Way Manager for the project.

### A GROUP EFFORT

The agency's relocation solution involved a two-pronged approach. Rather than work in a vacuum and try to negotiate the acquisition of the property alone, the acquisition agents teamed up with relocation agents to talk to the residents together, so that residents would feel comfortable that their needs were being met sufficiently, and would be more willing to sell their property. Moreover, having the relocation agents involved early on allowed them to better ascertain the situation and determine how best to assist the residents.

Initially, residents sought new rentals, but found they had a hard time qualifying for the financial resources needed. HART took the lead by

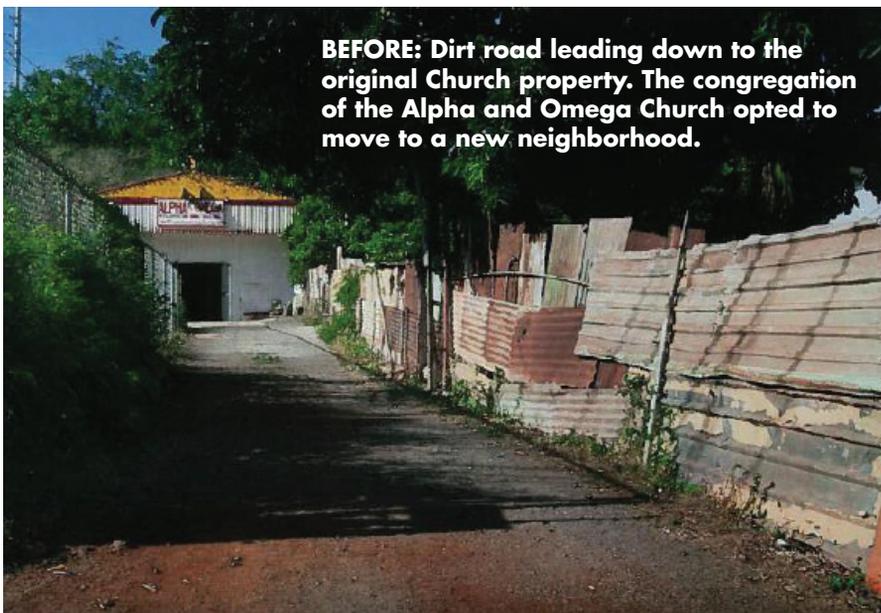
guaranteeing their rental payments for a year, and paying for it in advance so that the residents could establish the credit history needed to qualify on their own. HART also provided social services to assist residents in getting vocational education and finding jobs. Some residents who were previously unemployed are now working in new careers and are saving up to eventually purchase a home.

Twenty-two households have since been successfully relocated. Those families who previously lived in makeshift storage containers without windows, now live in decent, safe and sanitary rental properties. The other residents were also able to find replacement housing while keeping their households intact. Many of them have continued working with Helping Hands Hawaii to get the assistance and tools to help them succeed in life.

### MOVING THE CHURCH

With an overall lack of available comparable replacement properties in the area, relocating the local church posed an especially complex issue. In general, churches are difficult to relocate given their unique zoning restrictions. There are strict parking requirements imposed by local zoning, and density conditions stipulate distances between churches. When you combine the Alpha and Omega Church's lack of financial resources with an island that has limited land, the list of options becomes very narrow.

The church had been in existence since the 1970s and had historical ties to the Banana Patch neighborhood. The pastor and his family received most of their income through the church. They lived and worked directly on the property, which included the church and their living quarters, and they wanted to continue living on the same property where they could worship. They





The team conducted weekly staff meetings to discuss the status of acquisition and relocations.

The Alipio family, one of 25 separate families who lived in the Banana Patch, is now successfully relocated.



needed a mixed-use property that could accommodate both uses.

An initial search of suitable replacement properties in their desired neighborhood was unsuccessful. Given the small size of the church and lack of financial resources of the congregation, the relocation seemed impossible. HART began to look at other options, including even building a new church and living quarters on vacant land. Unfortunately, given the amount of time required to permit and build, this was not a viable option.

Another option was to relocate the church to another neighborhood. The team found a replacement property that met the pastor's needs and fulfilled all the zoning requirements. However, the church leadership had significant reservations about moving so far away from the congregation's membership. With some persuasion and encouragement, the pastor and the church were able to see the potential for expanding their congregation. Being able to reach out to a new, untapped demographic made the decision easier for them.

The team was able to apply Last Resort Housing standards to relocate the pastor's family and church. They also assisted through the lengthy escrow process,

obtained the proper permits, and worked with the contractor to rehabilitate the property so that it would meet the requirements. The pastor and his family have settled in nicely at their new location, residing upstairs and presiding over their newly-minted worship facility.

"We are grateful to have been relocated to Wahiawa successfully," said Reverend Nemesio T. Arizabal, pastor of the Alpha and Omega International Christian Ministries. "Our congregation is very satisfied with their new place of worship. We would like to thank the City for its efforts in assisting us."

### THE SCHEDULE PROGRESSES

The project has undergone extensive scrutiny, particularly surrounding its cost. The public sentiment over whether the City and County of Honolulu should build the rail system continues to be split, and in the current political climate, rail has become a defining issue in the U.S. presidential election. Another hot-button issue involves the real estate acquisition of the properties needed for the rail, due to limited, densely-populated land along the corridor.

Recognizing the unique needs of the residents and tenants early on during the interview process helped HART to

determine the most appropriate course of action. Upon encountering some fairly unusual living situations, the team's methodical approach to problem solving led to a successful relocation project. Another contributing factor to the project's success stemmed from partnering with the community and a non-profit organization to assist the residents with basic services.

Despite the challenging circumstances, the HART right of way team was able to assist residents and surrounding community, using unique, non-traditional methods to successfully relocate an entire community. The Honolulu Rail Transit Project seems to be starting off on the right track.

### Ryan Ng

*As a Right of Way Agent on the Honolulu Rail Project, Ryan works for Parsons Brinckerhoff Inc., he coordinated the property acquisition and was intricately involved with the Banana Patch relocation. Ryan authored the project's Real Estate Acquisition Management Plan (RAMP) and was instrumental in its creation. He is a member of IRWA and is a real estate broker in the State of Hawaii.*

