

Rail project the best job stimulus out there

After spending the summer mostly silent and sullenly defensive on the progress of Honolulu's rail project, it was great to see Mayor Mufi Hannemann bounding across a stage last week for a rousing pep rally for the train.

Billed as an "update" on the \$5.5 billion rail project, this was a show, not a speech. It was a little gimmicky and more about the politically ambitious mayor than about the train.

Still, it was a well-timed and appropriately upbeat event, and a powerful statement that construction of the

commuter rail system couldn't come at a better time to shore up Hawaii's wobbly economy.

While there are still arguments about the need for rail, more and more we're looking at the project as a sure-thing job creator that will help get Hawaii through this deepening downturn.

Hannemann forecasts that the decade-long project will create 10,000 jobs, including 4,000 in construction. By next year, he expects 4,000 people to be working on rail. While those numbers may be a touch optimistic, there is no question that thousands

of people will be needed to lay out and build up the elevated system.

The selection of Kiewit Pacific, a local contractor with a solid record of accomplishing big jobs, to handle the \$483 million first phase of the rail system is also an encouraging sign that the bulk of the work will go to local people.

Hannemann is hot to get the rail work started and he's right to be worried about the temptation Oahu's transit tax fund offers to state legislators desperate to fill a \$1 billion budget shortfall.

The Senate made a tentative grab

last year but quickly pulled back. Now, that \$421.5 million in the rail fund may be too irresistible, at least until the hiring starts and highly visible dirt-moving actually starts.

Even if you hate the train and plan a lifelong boycott, you have to love — or at least, like — the boost it will give to employment as Hawaii tumbles further into a recessionary trough. With economic recovery not expected to begin in earnest until 2011, those 4,000 jobs will support a lot of families and generate millions in consumer spending.

Now, that's real stimulus.