

Iwi present a challenge for rail project

Like other large construction projects in Hawaii, the city's rail-transit system is expected to uncover ancestral iwi, or Native Hawaiian remains, in the course of building the track pillars and supporting infrastructure.

Proper handling of iwi — respecting the cultural sensitivities of Hawaiians — has been a point of dispute that has caused costly delays in building projects statewide, including the Ward Villages development.

This calls for advance planning for the city's rail transit project to ensure that iwi uncovered are handled appropriately and with sensitivity to avoid such costly delays. The city is planning on conducting archaeological surveys prior to construction. Those surveys should be as thorough as possible, and proper protocols should be followed upon the discovery of iwi, whether identified prior to construction or inadvertently.

This will be especially important in the project's Downtown and Kakaako segments, where the sandy substrates are expected to contain higher than normal numbers of burial remains.

It's encouraging to see that the city has already taken important steps to plan ahead. It has included recommendations of key stakeholders, such as the Oahu Island Burial Council, in developing a federally mandated agreement to mitigate the impacts on iwi and other historical, cultural and archaeological resources.

The city will also invite the council and other stakeholders to help lay the groundwork for its archaeological surveys, to be done two years ahead of breaking ground in sensitive areas.

Even so, the issue remains contentious. The burial council refused to sign

the agreement, saying the city should have surveyed the area before deciding on the Downtown/Kakaako segments of the route; the council prefers to push the route further mauka along either Beretania or King streets.

That's a bad idea. While the possibility of encountering iwi may be higher along the Halekauwila Street route, the city's route selection was based on careful planning and engineering studies.

Those studies underscore the existing route will not only yield the preferred ridership but also create less impact on adjoining properties, resulting in lower land acquisition costs and traffic delays. These are critical factors in planning the \$5.5 billion public works project.

All stakeholders must work together to ensure that iwi are treated with respect — and that protocols are followed to avoid costly, unwarranted delays. Having a sensible game plan in place early on will help make that happen.