

For Immediate Release

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New study examines public transit options on Hawai‘i Island *Report recommends practical transportation approaches to reduce fossil fuel use*

KAMUELA, Hawai‘i—July 8, 2014—Hawai‘i Island could reduce fossil fuel use by implementing some short-term, high-impact solutions, according to a new report prepared for [The Kohala Center](#) by researchers from [University of Michigan School of Natural Resources and Environment](#).

The report, [Expanding Transportation Opportunities on Hawai‘i Island](#), provides recommendations for reducing fossil fuel use by improving access to Hawai‘i County’s [Hele-On](#) transit services and lowering travel costs through rideshare programs.

The [County of Hawai‘i Energy Sustainability Plan: Five Year Roadmap](#) (2012) identified fossil fuel use as a key challenge to achieving energy sustainability. Although Hawai‘i Island has integrated more renewable energy onto its electrical grid than anywhere else in the United States—and its residents participate in carpooling at a higher rate than the national average—its reliance on fossil fuel remains high, with more than half of the island’s energy demand attributed to transportation. Furthermore, the high cost of energy disproportionately impacts low-income households, presenting an equity issue that could become more acute over time.

“In recent years our public discussion of energy sustainability has focused on electricity generation,” said Dr. Elizabeth Cole, chief operating officer of The Kohala Center. “We wanted to examine ways to reduce import dependence in the transportation sector and bring that topic to the fore.”

In the past five years, Hawai‘i County Mass Transit Agency (MTA) has increased ridership significantly through its *Hele-On* bus service and shared taxi program—from less than 800,000 riders in 2006 to approximately 1.15 million in 2011 (Hawai‘i County [Comprehensive Annual Financial Report](#), 2011). Yet the County still faces a number of challenges in increasing access to high-quality, convenient, and cost-effective transit options. Public transit riders in Hawai‘i County, who earn about half of all other commuters on the island, have commutes that are twice as long as the average commute (68 minutes vs. 30 minutes).

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“Our project goal was to improve the bus system on Hawai'i Island, whether that was from an economic, environmental, or social perspective, or a combination of them,” said University of Michigan research team member Trevor McManamon. “We've found that there are likely opportunities that make sense in all three of those areas, and some of those opportunities do not require significant upfront investment.”

The report's short-term recommendations for Hawaii County's Mass Transit Agency include: 1) the implementation of Google Transit, a low-cost technology option that could help passengers identify ideal routes, schedules, and connections; 2) website enhancements that would make it easier for potential riders to navigate; and 3) the development of clearer route schedules and maps that can be viewed on a website without downloading a file. Longer-term recommendations include ways that the agency can gather data to optimize route planning and increase ridership.

“The study puts Hawai'i County in a better place to understand where the rubber meets the road,” said William Rolston, Hawai'i County energy coordinator.

The research team sought input from several public agencies and residents and studied the public transit system in Maui County due to its similarity to Hawai'i County's rural setting. Maui County currently uses Geographic Information Systems (GIS) to develop clear route maps and schedules for transit riders, and uses Google Transit to publish information about their services. The Maui system's budget is more than double that of Hele-On, as is its ridership.

The report also examined rideshare and van pool options to lower vehicle miles traveled and reduce the cost of commutes by increasing the number of riders per vehicle.

The report, *Expanding Transportation Opportunities on Hawai'i Island*, is available online at <http://bit.ly/1k0Fivv> or by calling The Kohala Center at 808-887-6411.

About The Kohala Center

Founded in the year 2000, The Kohala Center (<http://www.kohalacenter.org>) is an independent, community-based center for research, conservation, and education. We turn research and traditional knowledge into action, so that communities in Hawai'i and around the world can thrive—ecologically, economically, culturally, and socially.