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The Council advances the bill, but the budget chairwoman says she will hold it till next year

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Honolulu City Council members will likely defer until next year a final decision on Mayor Kirk Caldwell's controversial plan to raise money for bus routes by selling advertising on the sides of city buses.

The Council voted 8-1 to advance Bill 69 (2013) on second reading and to send the bill back to the Budget Committee, but not before Budget Chairwoman Ann Kobayashi made it clear that she intended to hold the bill until the Council deliberates on the fiscal 2016 budget in spring 2015. Council Chairman Ernie Martin was the sole "no" vote.

Caldwell officials lobbied hard for passage of the bill for the fiscal 2015 year amid strong opposition from the Outdoor Circle of Hawaii.

Transportation Services Director Michael Formby called the bill a move toward "transportation equity." The \$6 million to \$8 million the city projects the program could take in annually would go toward restoring previously cut bus routes, as well as adding new ones, without raising bus fares or property tax rates, he said.

Many people depend on TheBus as their only means of transportation, Formby said.

Opponents, led by the Outdoor Circle, warned that the city could not control offensive content and that the new policy would lead to a proliferation of advertising on commercial vehicles in a state that has taken pride in being free of billboards.

North Shore resident Bob Leinau called it "blackmail" for Caldwell officials to tie the ability to improve bus service with selling advertising on the sides of the vehicles.

Public testimony for the bill came from bus advocates and neighborhood board leaders from West Oahu and Central Oahu who were told routes in their neighborhoods would be restored.

Because the bill was not to kick in until six months into fiscal 2015, the administration programmed \$1.5 million in bus ad revenues for restored or new routes.

But both Kobayashi and Martin said there was no need to pass the bill this year because the Council has been able to make up the \$1.5 million through savings and cuts elsewhere in the city's \$2.15 billion operating budget.

"I do not anticipate seeing this bill until probably the next budget cycle," Kobayashi said, noting that cuts have been made to the budget while the city also gained an additional \$4.4 million in hotel room tax revenues due to a bill approved by the state Legislature.

"So we are looking at ways to provide bus service over the next year without passing Bill 69," Kobayashi said in explaining her "yes" vote. "But we do need it in place in the committee."

Marti Townsend, Outdoor Circle executive director, said the additional year gives city officials time to examine the pitfalls of bus ads in other cities where they've been allowed.

Also Wednesday, the Council voted 8-1 to advance on first reading Bill 38, which would add so-called biodegradable products to the upcoming ban on plastic bags at checkout after environmental groups raised several concerns. Bill 38 also calls for the implementation date to move to Jan. 1, 2016, from the existing July 1, 2015.

An official with the Hawaii Food Industry Association and distributor Island Plastic Bags opposed the bill, but said they would be OK if the existing ordinance were changed to allow bags defined as compostable, rather than biodegradable.

They argued that there is a recognized standard for compostable bags, which are allowed in a number of mainland cities including San Francisco and Seattle.

Martin, who co-introduced the original plastic bag ban, and Councilman Ikaika Anderson said they objected to postponing the effective date of the bill by six months.

Councilman Breene Harimoto said he would be amenable to hearing the arguments on both points as the bill is discussed in the Public Works and Sustainability Committee.

Also, the Council voted Wednesday to:

» Adopt Resolution 14-69, calling on the city auditor to perform a management and performance audit of the city's troubled Handi-Van operation.

» Adopt Resolution 14-24, allowing the city to begin condemnation proceedings for remnant property for the Kaneohe-Kailua Sewer Tunnel.

» Approve the appointment of Michele Nekota as city parks director. A Honolulu native and the daughter of former Councilman Tom Nekota, also a former parks director, she previously held the position with Salt Lake City.