

Construction jobs down 3% on Oahu

A contractors' advocate says thousands more would be working if Congress took action on transit legislation

By Sarah Zoellick



Honolulu lost 600 construction jobs from January 2011 to January 2012, according to the Associated General Contractors of America. A worker on a building on the corner of Piikoi and King St.

Honolulu lost 3 percent of its construction jobs last year, more than most major U.S. cities, said an industry representative urging Congress to pass transportation-related funding.

"What makes these job losses even more frustrating is the fact that many of them could have been avoided," John Romanowski, president of the Hawaii chapter of the Associated General Contractors of America, said at a news conference yesterday.

"Thousands more construction workers would be employed today if Congress wasn't years late in passing the highway and transit bill," he said.

Honolulu lost 600 construction jobs between January 2011 and January 2012, the contractors group said.

Out of 337 major U.S. cities, Honolulu is among 111 that saw a decline in construction employment in 2011, said Romanowski, who is also vice president of James W. Glover Ltd., a Honolulu asphalt company.

Since 2008 Honolulu has lost about 6,300 construction jobs, or about a fourth of its total, he said.

Employment would be higher if Congress had passed long-range transportation funding bills that would allow governments to plan improvements, Romanowski said.

The most recent long-term highway funding bill was passed seven years ago and expired in 2009, he said.

Congress has passed eight short-term extensions since then but not a long-term funding plan.

States now stand to lose highway and transportation funding if lawmakers don't strike a deal by the end of March, Romanowski said. He noted the U.S. Senate on Wednesday passed a bipartisan, two-year, \$109 billion highway bill, which is now in the House of Representatives.

Kenneth Simonson, chief economist for AGC of America, said he thinks Honolulu has seen a decrease in construction employment because of the state's "historic dependence on federal funding."

About 80 percent of the cost of a typical large-scale transportation project in Hawaii is covered by federal dollars, said Dan Meisenzahl, spokesman for the state Department of Transportation.

"Federal dollars are critical to Hawaii," Meisenzahl said. "We're a small state, but we have so many challenges as far as our roadways. The federal money is our lifeline."

Road conditions are top of mind for many in Hawaii following the recent heavy rain, which led to dozens of reports of potholes on Oahu roads.

In the week of March 4 to 10, the city received 243 requests to fix potholes (78 to its website and 165 to its pothole hot line), city spokeswoman Louise Kim McCoy said.

"We do not have a cost estimate to repair all of them," McCoy said. "However, based on \$3,000 to fix 300 potholes, we can estimate that it would cost about \$10 per small pothole," she said. "This amount includes material, labor and equipment."

Meisenzahl said the state is still gathering official complaint numbers because it has been busy filling the holes.

Residents who have sustained vehicle damage as a result of a pothole can attempt to collect compensation for repairs by filing a claim with the Corporation Counsel office, McCoy said.

Potholes on city roads can be reported by calling the pothole hot line at 768-7777 or visiting goo.gl/UmcB. To report a pothole on a state road, call the hot line at 536-7852.