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City's new hire to guide development near rail

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Honolulu Mayor Kirk Caldwell on Thursday introduced the new head of Honolulu's Transit Oriented Development Program — the city's long-term push to create high-density, walkable communities around its planned rail stops and to curb urban sprawl.

Harrison Rue, a principal with Virginia-based consulting firm ICF International, was hired to take over Sept. 1 as administrator of the program. Rue previously served three terms on the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency's National Advisory Council and worked on agency "smart growth" initiatives, according to a city news release. He also served in city planning roles in Hawaii, including as a team leader for an Oahu-wide city traffic-calming program that created more than 30 neighborhood plans from 1998 to 2002, the release stated.

Rue will replace Terry Ware, who served as director from September 2009 until April, when Ware left the city for a job in Denver, where his family lives, according to Jesse Broder Van Dyke, Mayor Kirk Caldwell's spokesman.

The Transit Oriented Development Program job falls under the city Department of Planning and Permitting.

The announcement of Rue's appointment came the same day that George Atta, director of the planning department, presented City Council members with a "framework" to help guide transit-oriented development at the 21 stops along the planned 20-mile rail line.

The framework rated the areas surrounding each stop as one of four types:

- » A "major urban center" (high-density residential and commercial in the heart of the city).
- » An "urban neighborhood" (medium-density housing and neighborhood retail).
- » A "mixed-use village" (lower-density development but walkable, with commercial or education centers).
- » A "major destination/employment center" (not residential — an area with a high concentration of jobs or a single use).

The framework recommended that the City Council adopt by July 2014 financial incentives, such as tax credits and tax-increment redevelopment financing (where tax revenues from rising property values are used to fund neighborhood improvements), to help attract private development in the city's designated transit-oriented development neighborhoods.

The city needs to cover expensive infrastructure developments, such as costly sewer system upgrades, which developers won't cover, in order to spur transit-oriented development, officials said. Councilman Breene Harimoto, who chairs the Council's Transportation Committee, called that a "huge challenge."

"The city will have to take the initiative here," Harimoto said Thursday. "We can't rely on the private sector to do that kind of stuff."