

# Our Transportation System is in Crisis - X

This is the tenth article in our analysis of the transport system in the country. This week I had planned to introduce some transport improvement measures, but was derailed, so to speak, by new developments in the press, and this article is addressed directly to the Minister of Transport.

The purpose of this series of articles is to assist the population to be enlightened and insistent on high quality of service and standards in matters of transportation.

The transportation system that develops in a country is primarily the result of market forces which are influenced by policies generated by various administrations. It is the responsibility of elected officials in a democratic environment to develop and implement policies in the best interests of the electorate, policies which as far as possible reflect the electorate's wants and needs, but do so in a socially, economically, and environmentally responsible manner.

At the technical level, engineers are supposed to systematically and enquiringly apply the knowledge of science to real world problems. The people making decisions are however not engineers; however, the current Minister of Transport happens to be both an engineer and a decision-maker.

The latest solution being promoted is the construction of a 15-plus billion dollar rail transit system, but the population has not been provided with the details. In terms of scale, if we were to spread single dollar bills on the ground and join them edge-to-edge, the sum of 15 billion dollars would occupy an area of 154 sq. km, or the geographic area of the entire north-western peninsula of Trinidad.

We know that last year Parsons Brinckerhoff was awarded a contract to conduct a national transport study, and that their contract was later expanded to

include investigating the feasibility of light rail transit. What we need to know includes the following:

(a) Has the on-going national transport study completed any analyses and recommendations?

(b) Has the study arrived at conclusions regarding the role of rail transit?

(c) The term "light rail" was introduced into the local vocabulary about one year ago (before that we had monorail), but we have recently witnessed a change to "rapid rail." This may lead some readers to think that rapid rail might be a fast light rail. But this is not so. Rapid rail provides much higher passenger capacity and the exclusive right-of-way is either elevated or underground (subway). Light rail speed ranges from 15 to 25 km per hr, while Rapid rail speed ranges from 35 to 100 km per hr. Rapid rail requires a much higher level of sophistication and technology in order to maintain its much higher speeds than light rail. Why has this change been needed?

Perhaps consideration should be given to high speed magnetic levitation (maglev) rail recently in operation in Shanghai, China – the first of its kind in the world – with 464 seats and speed of up to 430 km per hr. That is 2020 vision!

(d) The rapid rail ad states that the proposed rail system will "relieve existing traffic congestion, reduce traffic delays..." This is a common misconception in the minds of many people, and I suspect that is why there is ready support that a rail system (light / rapid / commuter, etc) will ease traffic congestion!

While rail transit has the capability for moving volumes of people in short periods of time, it does not ease traffic congestion, except if penalties are imposed on the private car users to coerce them to change their mode of transport. Congestion is only relieved when the numbers of vehicles in the

traffic stream are reduced drastically. I suppose you are still to alert the population that congestion charging is coming (such as road tolls, road user taxes, etc), and that the choice for those of us wedded to our cars will be simple: queue or pay!

It is well known in developed countries that politicians are terrified that their car owning voters will savage any administration that tries to introduce direct measures of traffic congestion restraint. I hope your consultant has already advised you that the only persons who would readily use your new transit system are those who have no other choice (captive users), provided that they could afford it. Even if your new system is as sophisticated as is being promoted for Dubai, it will not be sufficient for most of those already using a car.

In other words, we all want light rail, rapid rail, and perhaps even the Maglev, but we want it for the next person, not us! The car has allowed each of us to travel where we will, in comfort and security, at a time of our own choosing. To us, the car is not just an aspect of modern living it is a precondition for moving up in society. Owning a car remains a goal for each of us.

In a recent public poll conducted in Greater Vancouver, Province of British Columbia in Canada, transport problems rank the highest, with healthcare and crime following, second and third, respectively. Sixteen percent of private car drivers said they would switch to modes like transit, carpooling, cycling, motorcycling and walking if the cost of their trips increased by just 10 percent, and 60 percent of private car drivers would switch if costs doubled. Can any administration in Trinidad and Tobago even consider road tolls or higher road user taxes?

Despite what I have just said, I may be persuaded to find the rapid

rail attractive. That is, if I could replace having to take my children to their schools and drop my wife to her job with a seamless pickup from my home by a comfortable shuttle to the rail terminal, and then seamless and secure shuttle services for us from the rail terminal to our various destinations, and of course, vice versa in the evening. No maxi taxi with touts, harassment, and unsafe driving habits!

Perhaps I may be wrong, and history may be kind to you, in that in 20 years you may be considered a visionary and the rapid rail system would have proven to be just what was needed. The fact is that transport and land use activities have a way of adjusting themselves to create some type of equilibrium (stable or otherwise). But we may be answering the wrong question.

The question should be which mix of modes would be (a) for all members of the travelling public, regardless of their abilities or disabilities, (b) capable of delivering the required person and goods capacity, (c) flexible enough to accommodate on-going changes in transport preferences and needs, (d) reliable, (e) affordable, in terms of capital and operating costs, and (f) balanced, not focusing major capital expenditures only in high growth areas, thereby reflecting imbalance in national transportation priorities.

Since the rapid rail ad is considering services for design, build, etc., it means that some amount of planning has been undertaken concerning travel demand densities, routes, elevated travel, subway, access to airport, and so on. I am appealing to your sensibilities as a fellow engineer, that you mandate your consultant to arrange with Eng. Geoffrey Abdullah, President of the Association of the Professional Engineers of Trinidad and Tobago (APETT) for a breakfast seminar to

present their ideas to the key stakeholders. That is my first of two requests. Next week, I will submit my second to you.

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