

# Our Transportation System is in Crisis – 201

Traffic congestion is a result of poor transportation planning. But traffic and transportation are not the same. It is just as corruption is an outcome of poor governance. But they are not the same. Governance is the manner in which the State exercises its authority to provide public goods and services; corruption is the use of public office for private going.

So what do traffic and corruption have in common? They both suffer from the following: (1) lack of transparency in decision-making; (2) weak accountability; (3) bad quality of service leading to bribery; (4) social inequality, with the less influential having to pay more than more influential persons or firms; (5) ineffective public finance arrangement and procurement; and, (6) poor stakeholder participation and oversight.

The water taxi service between San Fernando and Port-of-Spain was launched in December 2008 and operates with four foreign-used vessels—three of which have a capacity of 150 passengers each. There was never any public involvement for this proposition or technical justification of the need for this huge investment by the last Administration. It was reported recently that current Transport Minister, Jack Warner, has lamented the fact that \$64 million was spent to buy and fix one of these ferries.

The Minister has stated that the water taxi service costs the Government \$8,322 per day, and the price for a trip is \$15. And there are morning and evening trips. So, there is very significant public subsidy. And I agree that transit subsidy is to be preferred over fuel subsidy. However, there should be justification for any level and purpose of public subsidy. The Minister said one alternative for reducing the operational costs of the

water taxi service could be by contracting the service. He said that another alternative use to reduce the cost of operation could be to use the ferries for excursions, picnics, or for tourists, and that we have to become creative. But all these things should have been assessed prior to the investment! The current Administration has to undertake all the ground work.

Further, more than a year ago new ferry vessels were ordered for the service, and will arrive soon. They cost \$430 Million. These are high-speed passenger catamaran ferries designed to carry 405 passengers each at a speed of approximately 37 knots. It was the original intention that, in addition to the water taxi service, the ferries would provide emergency backup for the existing inter-island service between Trinidad and Tobago. In order to meet this secondary function, the manufacturer has configured all four vessels with the capability to retrofit a forward mounted T-foil ride control system at short notice, allowing the vessels to operate in open, unprotected seas.

The last administration spoke of establishing “*a regional service going northwards firstly to Grenada, then St Vincent, St Lucia and possibly across to Barbados as an actual form of regional transportation, because of the situation with air transport within the region,*” in their Vision 2020 strategy plan, which aimed for “*an efficient, integrated, multi-modal public transport system. When fully operational the water taxi service is expected to facilitate the transport of approximately 8,000 to 12,000 passengers in a normal working day and will be integrated with other transport systems.*”

But where is the analysis to substantiate such statements. It reminds me of how many land developers function here, by

clearing all the trees from the land and leaving the space completely barren, and then they examine what to do. So, we purchase all the transport vehicle we desire and construct some type of interim infrastructure to accommodate them, and we think we have a transportation system.

My thinking is that existing infrastructure facilities at La Brea and Point Fortin can readily be adjusted to accommodate an extension of the water taxi service to Point Fortin. A current road trip of 43 km between San Fernando and Point Fortin can take more than one and a half hours during off-peak periods.

Dear Reader, how many of the six factors above do your think have influenced the water taxi project?

Next, is the rapid rail project, or should I say Commuter Rail, since that is what the project evolved to be. Imagine a small nation like ours needing a commuter train system. Over \$500 Million was spent to do planning and preliminary design of a train system to link Port of Spain with Arima and San Fernando. Public engagement was undertaken at the end in April this year because it was mandatory in order to receive environmental clearance. And then ‘all hell broke loose,’ as many stakeholders only then understood the significant impacts of the undertaking. In fact, economic justification of this project has still not been presented, and no financial information has been given publicly.

The creation of a transit authority was a fundamental part of the project. So why hasn’t a transit authority been created even now! Are the technical advisors worried that the work of an appropriately functioning transit authority may reveal that several of the elaborate and high-capital projects are unnecessary, and that the development and management of

our existing privately-owned and publicly -owned systems may be all that are required?

I am sure that many reports would have been prepared as part of the train project, and these must be assessed in as short a period as possible, and a statement made by Government.

Dear Reader, how many of the six factors above do your think have influenced the rapid rail project?

e-mail: [info@ccost.org](mailto:info@ccost.org)