

Why is owning a car so important to us? It is the largest individual investment after a home mortgage. I would like to give a few reasons, in no order of priority:

1. It gives a sense of personal security, in that it is always available and not too far away, and inside it we feel safe and isolated from dangers on the outside.

2. It provides flexibility and freedom of mobility, as well as convenience of accessibility to activities, not always available to non-car owners.

3. It protects us from the weather and the inconvenience of having to seek and hope for transport during adverse weather conditions.

4. It can be a social status symbol, and depending on its type, age, condition and accessories, represents an attitude and image for its owner. And the driving behaviour displays driver culture.

5. It provides protection from a society that gives no priority to non-motorised road users, and that is in fact hostile to them, so that non-car owners feel compelled to aspire to become car owners.

But car ownership has an even greater importance to Government Administrators. *“It has a powerful machinic complex through its technical and social linkages with a wide range of supply industries, including parts and accessories, petrol stations, road construction and maintenance, service areas, repair garages and car parks.”* (David Bannister, 2005, *Unsustainable Transport*). In our situation, the supply industries include new and foreign-used vehicles. So, it provides jobs and creates economic activity. In my opinion, there are two other important factors: political financial support by corporate bodies, and individual voter and their combined-group support.

Trinidad and Tobago Automotive Dealers Association (TTADA) president, Visham Babwah has stated that *“the used car industry was created to serve the middle and lower income bracket.”* He said the association would like to import six year old Japanese used vehicles and seven year old ones from Singapore. Automotive Dealers Association of Trinidad and Tobago (ADATT), which represents dealers of new vehicles, has objected to TTADA, and their president, Philip Knaggs said if Government really wanted to make vehicles more affordable, it should reduce the duties and/or taxes on new small-engine vehicles.

The Minister of Trade and Industry, Stephen Cadiz, who is responsible for preparing a revised draft policy to regulate the used car industry, has wisely responded that *“everyone cannot get everything they want. As a responsible arm of Government, we are here to ensure a balanced approach that will meet most stakeholders’ demands.”*

Despite the tremendous benefits of car ownership, there are severe negative impacts, such as pollution (the effects of which have still not been investigated locally), and congestion which is so easily identifiable everywhere. The road infrastructure and management improvements will never be able to accommodate the demand for car ownership, especially since we live on an island state with limited land mass, and so congestion will inevitably worsen.

A review of the growth of private vehicles using data for the period 1995 to 2009, showed that

1. Over the last three years there has been an annual growth of vehicles of about 4 percent when compared to an annual growth of 6 percent over the previous 12 years.

2. The average annual growth of private vehicles over the period 1995 to 2009 is of the order of

14,000. Private autos comprise 70 percent of total vehicles on average.

3. By 2015 there is likely to be about 600,000 private autos, and about 650,000 by 2020.

In Trinidad and Tobago the annual population growth is of the order of 6,500 to 8,500 persons. So the annual rate of growth in Trinidad and Tobago for private cars is currently about twice the national population growth. This means that cars are growing faster than people in TnT.

Thus far in Trinidad and Tobago, very few people have commented on the hazardous environmental impacts of rapidly increasing carbon dioxide emissions caused by high auto usage.

The deteriorating traffic condition is not only affecting highways, where most of the attention from the authorities seems to be focussed, but the town centres are suffering much more. It is the inability of the severely constrained road network of all our town centres that limits their ability to accept and distribute traffic from our highways.

Therefore, the discussion and debate cannot focus simply on new and foreign-used vehicle sales, but on national transportation mobility and accessibility. I recognise that any restraint on new and foreign-used vehicle sales will involve reduced business activity in the sector, and perhaps even political negativity, but the debate has to begin with all stakeholders, not only vehicle suppliers. For example, It is not yet well-known that despite the high car ownership, the majority of the people (particularly women and children) have little or very inadequate access to transportation, resulting in many of our citizens being treated as second-class persons—and PH regularisation brings more absurdity to the equation.

e-mail: info@ccost.org