Our Transportation System is in Crisis – 335

New Year Greetings, with hope for a year filled good achievements. Newsday reported on January 2nd that Minister of Housing and the Environment, Dr Roodal Moonilal, said that 2014 will be the start of another construction boom in the country. I immediately became uneasy.

I graduated as a civil engineer just after the end of the first economic boom period in the early eighties. Jobs were hard to find. I sent out several job applications. Can you believe that the Public Service had the best salaries, and most people were applying to the Government, and the Service Commissions Department was simply acknowledging applications?

Civil engineering and construction projects were reducing in numbers. In any economic downturn it is the civil engineers and associated specialists who suffer first, as construction comes to an abrupt end. Many civil engineers who refused to continue struggling here migrated to Canada and the United States, and sought out a better life. I occasionally encounter some of them at conferences and other professional programmes, and they have done quite well. Some of them have senior positions in foreign statutory agencies, and other top engineering firms. Others have their own well-established private practice.

Our country recently marked fifty years as an independent nation. In terms of our development in the discipline of engineering, I am not convinced that we have achieved self-determination. The University of the West Indies has had its only Faculty of Engineering located in Trinidad for more than fifty years, and has produced many local and regional engineers with graduate and postgraduate degrees, who are making significant contributions to the quality of life in their societies, and some of them have received national recognition by their Governments.

Yet locally, our decision makers are unable or unwilling to seek out our engineers to assist them in developing their project from concept, through procurement of planning, design, and physical implementation. And there is also a vicious developmental pattern. First of all, after seeking out the international assistance for our local problem, the advice given is inevitably the implementation of a major study or project. So, unless the solution to the problem is mega in nature, it is not considered a critical project. Next, as a result, the local firms cannot compete because of its scale, so we have no choice but to seek more international help. And the process is repeated.

Therefore, the local and regional engineering firms involved in physical development are rapidly downsizing in favour of the large multi-national firms establishing themselves here due to the will the mega-thinking decision makers. Engineers are now forced to seek employment with the multi-nationals. Some of the long-established local firms have already been sold to the multi-nationals. Therefore, the future of the engineering community is being determined by others.

I am not requesting '*buy local*', fully recognizing that we are living in a '*global village*'. But can we not determine the solutions to our problems ourselves, and conceptualize the approach to problem-solving fully recognizing our constraints, and thus seeking compromises as required? I am not advocating negativity against our foreign colleagues, but self-interest should be the priority of our decision makers—after all, these multi-nationals are not here because they would love to see this country develop.

Where are the UWI and UTT in all of this? Why haven't there been stakeholder discussions and public involvement, led by these institutions, inviting local and other independent international experts on issues such as (a) The characteristics of Design-Build as a project delivery mechanism, and its appropriateness and lessons learned for specific types of projects, including its advantages and disadvantages over the traditional method; (2) Use of Public-Private Partnership (PPP or P3) model as a contractual agreement for improved delivery and financing of projects, recognizing that Design-Build is its favoured method of delivery; (3) How should Requests for Proposal (RFPs) be prepared for these new models, including consideration of performance criteria versus detailed specifications; (4) How should risks be allocated in these models; etc.

The other problem I have with the current international contractual arrangements is with the '*local content*' that is included in the contract. This item is interpreted by the multi-nationals as the percentage of everything that they buy from TnT, such as the food they eat, the homes they rent, the offices they lease, the vehicles they lease, etc. They usually do not include as a matter of priority the percentage of local engineering and associated services unless they are mandated to do so by the decision makers. In fact, I know of one foreign firm who signed the contract a few years ago stating that the design would be done locally through a mix of foreign and local engineers, technologists, and technicians working together in Trinidad. Yet, the entire design was done abroad and sent for review to their foreign engineers based in Trinidad for review, and the signed agreement was never enforced by the public client. Thus, local engineers, technologists, and technicians were

minimized—perhaps the client thought that it would receive a more efficient design.

I have recently been told that several major infrastructure design-build contracts are soon going to be awarded to Chinese contractors, all to be paid for by the State. Perhaps, this is the new construction boom being referred to. My uneasiness is that the local engineering and other professional input is based purely on moral suasion. This would mean that every single national financial windfall thus far has been allowed to be directly controlled by players from the foreign construction contracting community.

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