

Our Transportation System is in Crisis – 396

This is the fifth article on the historical diary of the Trinidad Rapid Rail Project (TRRP). It started on October 22, 2015.

The Association of Professional Engineers of Trinidad and Tobago (APETT) held another breakfast seminar on May 31, 2006 entitled 'A Mass Transit System for TnT.' There was no representative from either the Ministry of Works and Transport (MWT) or Parsons Brinckerhoff (PB), Consultant for both the Comprehensive National Transportation Study (CNTS) and the TRRP. A letter from Minister Colm Imbert was read by then newly elected APETT President, Mark Francois, which sought to explain that the process for the TRRP had already started and that he did not want to interfere with the project process, and so regretted that he could not attend.

Budget Statement 2007 (presented on October 4, 2006):
“...we are undertaking a Comprehensive National Transportation Study to inform our transportation strategy over the medium to long term. The Study is expected to be completed by the end of this month. The main objective of the study is to provide a national transportation sectoral policy that is consistent with other public policies of the Government. The Study is also expected to present coordinated national transportation plans for the land, sea and air sectors that will provide the Government with a national, systematic decision-making tool for investment in transportation infrastructure over the next twenty years.

Rapid Rail Project

Mr. Speaker, one element of the Government's plan is the Rapid Rail project which is expected to provide fast and frequent service along the East-West and the North-South corridors. Together the two corridors will traverse over 120 kilometres. The rapid rail system

will serve over two-thirds of Trinidad's population and will link our two major cities: Port of Spain and San Fernando, as well as several towns including: Arima, Diego Martin, and Sangre Grande. The rapid rail system will give our citizens and visitors unparalleled mobility and access to work, school, shopping and more, and will truly be the backbone of Trinidad's transportation system. It is anticipated that a Design, Build, Operate and Maintain (DBOM) contract for the Trinidad Rapid Rail Project will be awarded by December 2006 and the system which will be operationalised in phases, will be in full service by the year 2011.”

The CNTS was expected to be completed by the end of October 2006, yet the rapid rail DBOM contractor selection process was already started and an award is to be made by December 2006.

The Minister of Works and Transport during his Senate contribution on October 17, 2006 in his Senate contribution referred disparagingly to a “guy who writes in the newspaper every week” challenging the rapid rail project, and he supported his case with quotations from two sources. The first was a report from RITES Ltd of India completed in November 2003 and the second source was a 2005 paper by Todd Litman, an urban planner and Director of the Victoria Transport Policy Institute.

The Minister did not identify the “guy” but as the only person publishing a weekly article on transportation, I naturally assumed that he was referring to me.

My comments and analyses have been based on specialist education and training to the doctoral level in traffic and transport engineering and nearly 30 years of practice locally and regionally.

With respect to RITES, I am fully aware of the status of that

company having tutored some of their engineers while I was a doctoral student in India. Further, in 2003 I met with engineers Sachdeva and Sharma of RITES on their visit to T&T and provided travel data on the east-west corridor. I had no further input into their study and only received an unofficial copy in 2004.

The important point is that the authors of the RITES report emphasized that their document was a concept paper and that a detailed feasibility was required. Unfortunately, the report went on to make specific conclusions and recommendations which were not supported by analysis. In view of this, I was a co-author of a formal written comment on the RITES paper to the Minister of Works and Transport in January 2005.

Regarding the paper on rail transit, Litman in a subsequent exchange with me stated and I quote “Although my study indicates that rail transit can provide significant benefits I think it is important to perform careful transportation and economic analysis to evaluate it in a particular situation. Its success depends on having supportive transportation and land use policies, including affordable fares, parking management, smart growth development policies, and improvements in walkability.”

Clearly both RITES and Litman are saying that a detailed feasibility is required and my contention is that we are proceeding at full speed without evidence of any feasibility.

e-mail: info@ccost.org

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