

Our Transportation System is in Crisis - 40

This series has expressed my disagreement with the process being adopted by the Government Administration to address the national transportation problems, by introducing rapid rail transit without any consideration of feasibility or the need for public involvement, nor any apparent concern for the consequences, in the biggest infrastructure investment ever attempted in this country's history. Despite this, I am quite pleased with the sudden attention being given for the first time to public transport.

The first national transportation study report submitted in 1967 by Parsons Brinckerhoff (PB) concluded that an integral part of the transportation plan was the development of bus service as the primary mode of public transport. Their solution was simple: starting with a required fleet size in 1968 of 360, flood the market with new buses every year from 1969 to the study year 1985 with additional buses totalling 1,540, and do some slight bus terminal improvements at Port of Spain and San Fernando to facilitate these measures. There was no analysis or description of the geographic distribution of these services and their phasing, nor was there any explanation of the operational and management issues.

Since that time until now, no agency of Government has been responsible for monitoring, controlling or coordinating the operations of the public transport industry. The Public Transport Service Act, which created the PTSC, the stated-owned bus company, in 1965, did not give them responsibility for regulating taxis, or maxi-taxis. The Transport Division of the Ministry of Works was responsible (and still is) for the licensing and inspection of taxis, and later, maxi-taxis. Amazingly, PB found that that arrangement was satisfactory and should continue. Further, their study made no attempt

to integrate land use planning and transportation planning; they just forecast the traffic and planned the roads for the projected traffic capacity. There was no plan for the development of public transport. Small wonder we are in the crisis we are in today!

In 2004, Central Tenders Board, having received Terms of Reference from the Ministry of Works and Transport (MWT), and acting on their instructions, invited proposals to conduct a Comprehensive National Transport Study (CNTS). There were four submissions, all from large well-known international firms in association with local consulting firms. No one knows who actually conducted evaluation of the tenders, but no submission received more than 70 marks out of a maximum of 100. Is it possible that the standard of evaluation criteria is so exacting that none of a top-class group of transportation specialists can receive distinction? If so, then what were the capabilities of the evaluators to so test?

We know that PB was eventually selected, and I am told that they received 69 points, but I am very surprised that the next in line was less than 60. This firm was Dessau Soprin International (DSI), who is currently designing the longest freeway ever done in Trinidad and Tobago – from Princes Town to Mayaro. What is interesting is that DSI's team included Steer Davies Gleave, well known in Europe and Latin America, particularly in their public transport solutions, and whose principal is Dr. Luis Willumsen, co-author of the textbook "Modelling Transport," now in its third edition.

But DSI's team also included most of the known nationals who are transportation experts, including some who are currently based abroad. The local members included: Dr. Trevor Townsend,

PhD in transportation systems engineering, former Chief Executive Officer, PTSC, as well as former Chief Traffic Engineer, MWT; Mr. Leveson Boodlal, former Chief Roads Planning Engineer, MWT, former Chief Traffic Engineer, MWT, former consultant to the Federal Highway Administration (FHWA), USA, and now with his own consulting business in Washington, DC; Dr. Alison Williams, PhD in transport engineering specialising in airport systems, and former Chief Technical Officer, Tobago House of Assembly; Dr. Philbert Morris, PhD Operations Research, retired Senior Lecturer in Mathematics, UWI, former Chairman, PTSC, and currently consultant in transport and software development; and, this writer. All of the above are quite experienced in local traffic and transportation matters, and have also been trained in the application of solutions in developed countries.

To say that I was disappointed in the score is an understatement. I immediately took two weeks leave from office. The pain is that this type of project is once-in-a-lifetime dream, and I missed it. Just think about it, the last study was forty years ago! I was longing to be part of the team that would shape the future mobility and accessibility of the people of TnT.

I heard Mr. Imbert say recently that PB was selected because the CNTS was an update of their earlier work in 1967. The truth is he was not the Transport Minister when the tender process was undertaken, so I sincerely hope that he was mistaken in his understanding.

Isn't it possible that nationals can work alongside foreigners to assist in the development of our country? Can local professionals not contribute meaningfully to the demands at hand? Can we not add tremendous value, especially with our unique knowledge and

understanding of the issues involved? Must we always be submissive to the advice from a foreign land? Do we not have the specific tools to determine our needs, and are we not skilled in acquiring those that we do not now possess? Are the public officials and other statutory officers aware or even concerned about this?

The immediate future is very exciting! PB is soon going to submit the second national transport plan for TnT. The Transport Minister may get away with saying there is not going to be feasibility for rapid rail transit, but not PB. If they recommend rapid rail, they must justify it in sufficient detail, and there should be key stakeholder involvement. I hope the MWT is taking note. Later, in December 2006, there is to be an award for the contractor for the Trinidad Rapid Rail Project. Exciting times indeed!

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