

Stop the political experiments with public transportation

The problems in the transport sector are political in nature. Politics can take the form of policies, regulations and directives. Is it possible to solve political problems with technical answers? Sometimes I get into a distressed state over our circumstances. Our political experiments with national public transportation for the last 50 years have failed miserably.

The first national transportation study report submitted in 1967 by Parsons Brinckerhoff (and still the only accepted transport planning study to date) 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 for (and still is) 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!

There has been an explosive growth in vehicle ownership. The ratio of population to car ownership in 1965 was 21:1. This ratio has dropped drastically to only 4:1, according to the Central Statistical Office (CSO). (It appears to be more like 2:1). Even though private car ownership is high in this country, the reality is that the majority of the population do not have access to a private car. Evidence of this may be seen every morning and evening with persons, particularly women and children, desperately awaiting some form of public transportation, including PH taxis and PH vans. In other words, access to transportation is difficult for non-car owners, and made increasing more so by the traffic congestion caused by car owners.

The voiceless, car-less, captive-to-any-type-of-transport nationals of T&T have never demanded rapid rail, mass transit, or any exotic transport. They are into the basics, including: (a) minimizing their limited disposable income on travel, (b) frequent and reliable with published schedules, (c) available for all classes of user-disability, (d) effective, serving a wide range of origins and destinations, (e) responsive to changing travel needs and patterns of activity, (f) safe and secure, especially at terminals and waiting areas, providing a travel experience that is not blighted by fear of assault, attack or other anti-social behaviour throughout the journey.

But the emphasis of successive Governments has been making the ownership of cars cheaper and facilitating their use by progressive road capacity improvements. How many lanes of roadway are adequate

to keep the rapidly expanding traffic volumes at acceptable speeds, and for how long?

The correct technical approaches are often not acceptable for several reasons, including:

1. They are politically unpopular, and the fear of being voted out becomes a concern; and,
2. They require a long lead-time for implementation (including planning and preparation) and successful testing.

The solutions to transportation problems are not obvious. If they were, then we would have had them addressed successfully long ago. The transportation system in any country comprises both related and unrelated components which influence the system and are influenced by the working of the system itself. The components of a transport system are (a) people, including pedestrians and riders; (b) vehicles; (c) parking facilities, terminals and other passenger transfer locations; (d) routes, including roads and intersections; (e) coordination of items (a) to (d), also called operations; and the sub-systems of maintenance, and information and control. The more organised the set of components, the better will the transport system respond to the demands placed on it in a desirable manner.

Every Government since our Independence has focussed exclusively on only items (b) and (d) above; that is, vehicles or modes of travel, and roads and intersections, including interchanges. Yet, every single one of us is dissatisfied with the level of service of the transportation system in our country.

I think that an affordable, convenient, and integrated public transport, with effective public information, would be very influential with the voting public. Any takers?

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Jan 19, 2017