

Our Transportation System is in Crisis - 64

Schools are closed for at least 74 days in a year, due to vacation and public holidays. So a typical year consists of about 186 work days. We all experience a major drop in traffic congestion when school is out, like now for the Easter Vacation. That is, for 72 percent of the year we have to cope with the daily frustration of traffic, or for nearly 30 percent of the year there is a significant improvement in rush hour transport demand situation in the country. Any optimal solution to our transportation problem must take account of this phenomenon.

Our students are not driving their cars to school, except some who are attending tertiary institutions. The few school vans and vehicles of the stay-at-home moms are of course not in the traffic mix during these periods. So why is there this drastic reduction in traffic? There are perhaps several reasons, including the following: (a) teachers are also on vacation; (b) there is no longer the confusion caused by parents / guardians dropping off / picking up students; and, (c) students are removed from the hustle for public transport.

Many years ago when most of our primary and secondary schools were planned and built, very few persons had vehicles. Many schools in the remote rural areas had the principal's quarters usually located next door to the school premises. Of these schools still left standing, all of the quarters have since been converted to being part of the school facilities. In those schools that had no quarters, it was usually only the principal and maybe one or two teachers who had a car. In fact it was not uncommon for male teachers to ride a bicycle to school. Even as a pre-schooler, I still remember my father, with his white shirt and thin tie, putting clips on his trousers and jumping onto his black Humber ladies' bike to

journey to the Chaguanas Government Primary School about a 1.5 km away. His main means of transport was eventually stolen.

But now, almost every teacher has a car and other members of staff as well. I was at the University of the West Indies (UWI) one afternoon, when I noticed a UWI Security Officer enter into a parking stall in the engineering carpark which is reserved for staff. He calmly locked up his vehicle and walked away. I could not help but wonder who would place the "parking boot" on his vehicle! So the parking requirements are very high, and so the traditional space provided for parking in the planning of schools is woefully inadequate. The result is that (1) children's play areas are compromised, and (2) the surrounding communities are plagued with the aesthetic unpleasantness of parked vehicles on roadways, sidewalks, lawns, etc.; (3) pedestrians are forced to walk on the roadways because of vehicles parked on the sidewalks, creating increased vulnerability with moving vehicles, and (4) there is tremendous "friction" to vehicular traffic cause by double parking.

At every school during the morning drop-off and afternoon pick-up it is almost a nightmare, particularly for the through-traffic who have no business at the school, but are simply passing by on their journey. All of us have experienced the confusion and traffic delays caused by inconsiderate late-coming parent / guardian who, instead of parking some distance away as space permits, choose to double park or park so as to interrupt the smooth flow of traffic. If it were not for the school fence, I swear these people would park at the classroom door, if possible!

And during the school holidays the competition for space aboard unscheduled and unreliable public transport is reduced. The trips for

work are therefore more organised and available within more predictable periods.

How valuable it would be to have a dedicated school bus transport that is properly planned and administered! It would ensure safe, efficient and reliable transport is available for students. School children would not be subjected to undue influence, duress or social de-motivation. They would benefit from educational opportunities through the ready accessibility to public transportation. They would benefit from social, sporting and cultural activities through accessibility to public transport.

The drivers of these school buses would be known by the members of the community and school staff within which they operate. They would know the students and may also function as additional overseers in the development of these children.

Consideration may also be given to developing the concept of alternative work hours in order to facilitate school children, such as (1) Staggered hours: different work groups are assigned to begin at different times (2) Flexi-time: allows employees to choose their own schedules within company-set guidelines (3) Compressed work-week: Four-day work weeks allow employees to complete 40 hours of work in four 10-hour days

In the longer term, plans may be made to create subsidiaries of the prestige school in other areas in order to encourage decentralization. Perhaps a better move may be to create zoning, whereby parents would have to send their children to schools within the zones in which they live.

These ideas do not require that we design our transport system around any particular technology, but around the needs of the customer.

e-mail: lfsystems@carib-link.net

