Our Transportation System is in Crisis - IX

This is the ninth article in our analysis of the transport system in the country. To most people traffic problems mean transport problems, when in fact, traffic problems are a symptom of transport problems. Last week I described the basic components of the transport system, and showed their interaction with each other. I have repeated the diagram for ease of reference. Our decision makers have been focussing almost exclusively on only two of the components of the transport system: vehicles and routes, and their associated terms, such as, more buses and maxis, cheaper automobiles, heavily subsidized fuel, roads, interchanges, and rail service.

For whom are we providing these components? What are we trying to achieve, and why? And how do we coordinate this information? The answers to these questions would involve the planning and administration of transport services, routes, and terminals and parking facilities; collection and analysis of data pertaining to who are the persons desiring to travel, where they are coming from, and where they are going; and, what are the accessibility needs of the travellers.

Which agency of Government is responsible for national transport planning and administration? To prove my point: we have a division for highways, including a special project unit for new and upgrading of highways and bridges; there is a division for licensing vehicles; and, there is a company for operating buses. When will meaningful institutional arrangements be effected for promoting the coordination and monitoring of the planning for locations of public buildings, housing communities, schools, etc. with respect to the transportation needs of the users?

Since 1986, the country has had a series of one-term Government administrations. Short-term administrations breed short-term thinking. That thinking has put little premium on medium- or long-term planning over the last decade. One consequence of this is that goal-setting, decision-making and the solving of public sector problems are generally unscientific – relying more on gut reaction and anecdotal evidence than on properly analysed systematic approaches. Transport has suffered in this respect, as this critical role of many data-collection agencies, such as, the Central Statistical Office and the Traffic Management Branch seems to have declined in importance.

Last week I also postulated that the most critical element in solving our transport problem is the proper interpretation of the problem. Today I seek to define the transport problem.

The national transport problems can be described as follows: (a) For private automobile users: delay, congestion, poor road safety enforcement, insufficient parking spaces; (b) For public transport users: unreliable operation, too long waiting time, delay, congestion, improper location of terminals / stops, lack of park-and-ride facilities, too high cost, too far to walk, not accessible to all society, not caring or treating passengers with dignity and respect, not serving a wide range of origins and destinations, not responsive to changing travel needs and patterns of activity, no assurance of high standards of physical safety, no security from fear of assault, attack or other anti-social behaviour throughout the journey; (c) For pedestrians and cyclists: delay, threat to safety by turning vehicles, lack of safe crossing facilities, not accessible to all society; (d) For goods transport: poor loading and off-loading conditions, delay to goods movement, lack of direct access; (e) For public transport operators (buses, maxi-taxis, and taxis): too high operating cost, poor amenities; no concessions, no priority, no administration; and, (f) For the environment: noise, smoke, dust and dirt; visual impact of traffic and associated transportation structures.

The measures for improving the transport system can typically be clustered into the following groups:

(i) Measures to influence the choice of mode (e.g. park and ride facilities, car pooling, auto-restricted zones, parking controls, public transport development and improvement in its characteristics such as, schedules, regularity, terminal and stop locations, pedestrian facilities, assessment of possibilities for new modes of transport to supplement the existing road network, such as maritime or ferry transport, or rail transport, and transfers between modes, etc.);

(ii) Measures to influence the choice of route and intersection control (e.g. route surveillance and management, reserved routes and lanes, one-way systems, traffic signals management or interchanges, etc.); and,

(iii) Measures to influence the time and place of trip origin or destination (e.g. staggering of work hours, decentralisation of land uses, road tolls, etc.). This would include measures which can assist in shaping urban areas into appropriate land use layouts.

The eventual mix of multiple modes and routes must be (a) for all members of the travelling public, regardless of their abilities or disabilities, (b) capable of delivering the required person and goods capacity, (c) flexible enough to accommodate on-going changes in transport preferences and needs, (d) reliable, (e) affordable, in terms of capital and operating costs, and (f) respectful of the environment.

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3/22/2006