

## The News (April 17, 2007)

### **Do we need the Karachi Elevated Expressway**

**By Roland deSouza**

Karachi

Like the National Monument in Islamabad and the KPT Port Fountain in Karachi, is the Karachi Elevated Expressway (KEE) a grandiose and pretentious symbol to establish that Pakistanis are second to none?

Or, like other mega-projects in this country that are a common substitute for far-sighted and intelligent planning, will it generate tape-cutting photo opportunities and colourful newspaper supplements in a lead-up to the general elections?

We can be sure though, as per the old chestnut of economics: 'There is no such thing as a free lunch', that the cost of the "annuity basis" project (US\$ 225 million in March 2006, rising to US\$ 350 million in September 2006, and peaking at an unknown figure if completed) will come out of the citizens' pockets.

The city government's stated reason is "to facilitate speedy movement/flow of traffic by creating an efficient and cost-effective system for motorists, including commercial and heavy vehicles."

Admirable and desirable motives, efficiency and cost-effectiveness. But there is little evidence that the requisite detailed studies, examination, and analysis of alternatives has been undertaken to arrive at the optimum "efficient" and "cost-effective" solution. The scheme seems to be a 'shoot-from-the-hip' attempt to address a genuine problem.

Firstly, it seems obvious that the introduction of discipline into the wild and woolly traffic and related practices of Karachi will increase manifold the traffic-handling capacities of the existing roads.

Could this increase be 100 percent? Could it be 200 percent? Could it be 500 percent? How much faster and smoother will traffic move if we are able to get away from the prevalent 'law of the jungle' and the 'survival of the fittest' strategies in traffic management?

What would be the cost of introducing such traffic discipline? Would it be US\$ 350 million? Even it were, wouldn't the benefit accrue to motorists all over Karachi and not only on the Shahrah-e-Faisal corridor, surely a much more "efficient" way to spend the citizens' money? If one wants to understand what kind of people live in a country, one must stand at a central intersection of a major city and observe the movement of traffic.

You will appreciate the state of education, the level of common courtesy, the state of writ of law, the intensity of aggression of motorists, the discipline of the pedestrians, etc. In a nutshell, you will experience the character of the "natives".

Some of the issues of road and traffic regulation that were identified during the KEE public hearing (detailed objections to the Environmental Impact Assessment made by the Institute of Architects, Arif Hassan, Shehri: Citizens for a Better Environment, and Pearl Continental Hotel can be viewed at [www.shehri.org](http://www.shehri.org)) were as follows.

First, the enforcement of traffic discipline: Traffic confusion is exacerbated by absence of lane markings, non-use of bus-lanes/stops, slow traffic occupying fast lanes, frequent switching of lanes (especially motorcycles) without signaling, speeding, not stopping at the red-light or at stop signals, stopping in the middle of the road, jay-walking, inadequate pedestrian crosswalks/overhead bridges, vendors/beggars at intersections, and the like.

Addressing these will slash wastage of fuel, cut health-endangering vehicle pollution, reduce congestion, improve safety, and save man-hours and mental stress in needless traffic jams. Second, the relocation of critical activities: Many vehicle trips would become unnecessary if markets and warehousing were re-sited to more appropriate locations. Is the citizenry aware that oil pumped from bulk storage at Keamari, through Clifton and DHA to the National Refinery in Korangi, is refined and pumped back to Keamari! Tankers are then loaded at the port and traverse the city roads on their way upcountry! The simple alternative of a loading terminal on the Superhighway has eluded the city administration for decades.

Third, the enforcement of non-peak timings for heavy traffic: Tankers, trucks and other heavy vehicles must only be allowed to use designated city roads outside normal working/peak hours and on holidays. This policy is presently weakly implemented.

Fourth, parking discipline: Commercial areas and school locations (which are springing up all over the city in violation of town-planning laws) generate parking chaos on the roads, thus reducing traffic capacity. This is very common on Shahr-e-Faisal, especially in the sections between Shahr-e-Quaideen Flyover and Awami Markaz, and between the airport and Quaidabad. As mandatory parking spaces in buildings are illegally converted to commercial and storage uses, cars are parked two and three deep on many roads in Saddar, off Chundrigar Road, PECHS, etc.

Fifth, the removal of encroachments: Thelawallas, rehri, khokas, street-vendors, generators, and other encroachments occupy pedestrian pavements and roads, reducing their traffic-handling capacity and forcing citizens to hazardously walk in the path of traffic.

Sixth, the proper signals & traffic control: The existing capacity of Shahr-e-Faisal and other thoroughfares can be significantly increased by cleverly engineered and coordinated traffic-signal systems, including provision for standby supply during KESC failures.

In Karachi, indeed in Pakistan, we tend to take the easy way out. For example, if 'A' publicly threatens 'B's life, the government will provide 'B' with a police guard; 'A' is too "powerful" to be taken up under law. If the solution to traffic snarls is to construct elevated expressways, we need many in Saddar and other choke points. How long can this country keep going sans the writ of law?

Is it possible to tackle the traffic issues of Karachi without a cheap and efficient system of public/mass transport? Again, with our Rolls Royce type of thinking, we believe that below grade subways or elevated trains are the only solutions.

Efforts to revive (and eventually extend) the Karachi Circular Railway, and link it up with a well-planned network of CNG buses to interconnect with the rest of the city have not generated sufficient political enthusiasm, perhaps because it is too simple and cheap a way out, without the potential for large kickbacks. The KEE is supposed to address port (KPT and PQA) traffic: wouldn't this traffic also be better served by the underutilised but cheap form of mass transit, the Pakistan Railway?

Karachi's planners and decision makers, like Delhi, Nairobi, Vancouver, and many other cities, must consult Enrique Penalosa, the former mayor of Bogot, Colombia, who is widely credited for

setting that city of seven million on a course of sustainable development. When Penalosa first began his radical strategies in 1998, his approval rating hovered around 15 percent. When his term ended three years later, he was hailed as one of Colombia's rising political stars.

A 2006 Canadian press report tells the story: "Enrique Penalosa presided over the transition of a city that the world—and many residents—had given up on. Bogota had lost itself in slums, chaos, violence, and traffic. During his three-year term, Penalosa brought in initiatives that would seem impossible in most cities, even here in the wealthy north. He built more than a hundred nurseries for children. He built 50 new public schools and increased enrolment by 34 percent. He built a network of libraries. He created a highly-efficient, "bus highway" transit system. He built or reconstructed hundreds of kilometres of sidewalks, more than 300 kilometres of bicycle paths, pedestrian streets, and more than 1,200 parks.

He did it all, in part, by declaring a war on private cars. "What are our needs for happiness?" he asked. "We need to walk, just as birds need to fly. We need to be around other people. We need beauty. We need contact with nature. And most of all, we need not to be excluded. We need to feel some sort of equality." Before you dismiss Penalosa as some hemp-hatted revolutionary, remember that this is a guy who titled his first book 'Capitalism: The Best Option'.

The problem in Bogota was that most people didn't have access to the public space that is supposed to make such happy things happen. The wealthy had turned city sidewalks into parking lots for cars. Public parks had been fenced off, essentially privatised by neighbours. And for years, the government had been blowing its budgets on highways and road improvements, with the encouragement of Japan's international development agency, which was apparently in the business of creating new markets for Japan's carmakers. So while the wealthy in Bogota could spend their weekends in country clubs or private gardens, the poor had little but jammed streets and televisions to occupy their leisure time. Penalosa resolved to establish a balance.

Penalosa's official 'War on Cars' began when he ordered the sidewalks cleared of cars. That triggered a movement to impeach him —unsuccessful, since it was in fact illegal for people to park on the sidewalks. He then launched a system, based on the number plate of the car, which banned 40 percent of vehicles from the roads during rush hour. Penalosa convinced his city council to raise the tax on gasoline, and used half the revenues to fund a rapid bus system ('transmilenio') that now serves more than 500,000 citizens."

Penalosa said "We had to build a city not for businesses or automobiles, but for children and thus for people. Instead of building highways, we restricted car use. ... We invested in high-quality sidewalks, pedestrian streets, parks, bicycle paths, libraries; we got rid of thousands of cluttering commercial signs and planted trees... All our everyday efforts have one objective: Happiness."

While some may consider all the suggestions made above to be difficult to implement and unrealistic, do we have any other sensible options? If we are to survive and prosper as a nation, we must solve our burgeoning urban issues, including traffic. Implementation of straightforward people-friendly and environment-friendly measures in this field will ensure a trickle-down effect to other areas of public life.

The KEE fiasco has presented the city government, the planners and the citizens of Karachi with a not-to-be missed opportunity: take stock of your citywide public spaces and traffic issues, and generate the political will to develop simple traffic discipline and an economical public transport system.

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