

Amazing scenes were witnessed on Monday January 18 when ... [reminds me of my favourite line in Sir Vidia Naipaul's *House for Mr. Biswas*]. I had planned to continue with my suggestions for the development of bicycling and walking, when the Rapid Rail project again caught my attention. The Government project manager for the planning and implementation of Rapid Rail in Trinidad, the National Infrastructure Development Company (NIDCO), announced in the weekend newspaper that consultations were to be held *“to present an overview of the project and to seek the input of stakeholders regarding the environmental feasibility of this project.”* And further, that *“this public consultation is a requirement of the Environmental Management Authority (EMA) and is a necessary condition for the granting of a Certificate of Environmental Clearance (CEC).”*

The first consultation was to be held at 5:30pm at the Ministry of Works and Transport (MOWT) head office at the corner of Richmond and London Streets in Port of Spain on Monday January 18, and the second at Lakshmi Girls Hindu College in St Augustine on Tuesday 19.

As I walked around the corner from Richmond Street, I observed a large crowd of people on both sides of London Street, and on the steps of the Ministry. I saw about two or three placards protesting the rapid rail. My first thought was that the maxi taxi operators had finally awoken and were attending the consultation. It then occurred to me that these numbers of people were too large to be maxi taxi operators, and perhaps they were Ministry workers rising up against some action or inaction – but this was 5:00pm!

Someone told me that the consultation was cancelled and

suggested that I view the notice posted on the wall of the stairs to the Ministry. The sign simply said that the consultation was *“postponed until further notice.”* I was told that the postponement notice was put up about 3:00 o'clock that afternoon.

Why was it postponed? There was no official present from the Ministry to give answers. Why was there no senior technical officer to give an explanation?

In the first place, I was not comfortable with the location of the first consultation. The Ministry is the client for the rapid rail, and locating the consultation at its head office might be seen by some as an intimidatory tactic. Consideration could have been given to using a neutral venue, such as Port of Spain City Hall, St Mary's College, or even the North Academy for the Performing Arts (NAPA), etc. The State could have indulged its common natives by facilitating the consultation at NAPA – who knows, stakeholders might even have been overwhelmed by the surroundings and might have forgotten their peeve!

I found out that the agitators were opposed to the Government taking their land and property for the rapid rail. It seems that the Rapid Rail representatives have been visiting sites in central Trinidad with a goal of creating a route alignment for the rapid rail, and they have started conducting soil tests, and other investigations relating to acquisition of properties. Of course, it is expected that there would be property acquisition for any major development, and naturally nobody would want the investment in their backyard: the NIMBY principle! There is always a need to explain why and how things are being done; and therein is the primary problem with this project.

The Trinidad Rapid Rail Project has always been operated with minimal public involvement. In fact, the very purpose of the consultation was simply for the approval of a CEC – therefore the logical conclusion is that if a CEC was not needed, there may be no need for stakeholder presence. Imagine the biggest mega physical investment to face taxpayers now and perhaps ever, and the Authorities do not accept the need for meaningful citizen participation. In other words, we will be directed by foreign nationals in such major local transportation and associated decisions. The way the cancellation notice was handled is typical of this style of decision-making.

I suspect that the protestors will be accused of being political opponents, or disgruntled, or detractors, etc. And there will be no further reaction by the decision makers, but I continue to appeal that that is not the way to proceed.

My thinking is that an environmental feasibility should include several evaluation categories, such as (a) operations, (b) property requirements, including residences required, commercial property required, land acquisition, (c) costs (such as construction, operating), (d) safety, (e) environmental consideration (during construction, during operations), (f) social impacts (affected interest groups, compatibility with adjacent/surrounding land uses, creation of jobs, support for women's issues, dislocation of maxi-taxi and taxi long haul operations, etc). These and others must be incorporated into the investigation, and presented to the citizens for their understanding.

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