

## Our Transportation System is in Crisis – 397

This is the sixth article on the historical diary of the Trinidad Rapid Rail Project (TRRP). It started on October 22, 2015.

Whatever the cost of the rapid rail being promoted, the fact is, whenever the contract is signed it has to be completed, even if the eventual cost is found to be two times higher, as you cannot build half a rail line! Further, a rail system has to be in place for at least the next 200 years, so if it is found to be consuming too much of taxpayers' subsidy after five years, we cannot easily choose another mechanism for transport. Therefore, why not do first things first.

The Trinidad Express newspapers of November 3, 2006 quoted the Government agency for the project (National Infrastructure Development Company Limited, NIDCO) that a consultant on the Parsons Brinckerhoff (PB) team *“has had an association with one or more of the tenderers for the project.”* The Government of T&T cancelled the contract of their consultant for the procurement of a contractor to plan, design, build, operate, and maintain the introduction of a 120-km rapid rail system.

The Government wanted to impress the public that *“any potential, actual or apparent conflict of interest is removed from the project.”* And that Government will remove any wrong doing in its mandate to evaluate and select a single contractor by December 2006 to implement the largest infrastructure project ever attempted in the history of TnT, which construction would be undertaken over many years.

This disclosure served to strengthen my concern for the process being adopted, and more importantly, has exposed some serious issues, which I will address today.

We must not forget that in January 2006 Government varied their contract with PB for the Comprehensive National Transport Study (CNTS) which was made by the Central Tenders Board (CTB) in February 2005, in order to get PB to be their consultant for the rapid rail project procurement. The rail project was only handed to NIDCO in June 2006, and a Sole Select contract was established with PB. It was not made public knowledge why PB was favoured as the best rapid rail consultant to advise the Government.

In their quest for a speedy introduction of rapid rail, the Government erred by creating a conflict of interest in inviting PB to be their rail consultant while PB was already contracted for the CNTS. PB, in turn, completely discredited themselves by accepting the invitation, when they could easily have reminded Government that part of PB's responsibility was to evaluate alternative modes of transport for appropriate selection. Would this great international transport expert not have known that a full transportation and economic feasibility study was required for rapid rail? Did they document this somewhere? Now, with their firing from the rail project, the entire rail project as well as the CNTS was likely to have been compromised.

The entire rail procurement process, from preparation of the Request for Proposals (RFP) to the recommendation of Qualifications Based Selection (QBS) method, which has no consideration of price for the evaluation and selection of the rail contractor, and all the advice in between, was prepared by PB. Can any rail bidder still have been comfortable with the process?

The Government stated that PB recommended rail in the CNTS to be the backbone of transportation in this country. Could we have any confidence in their submissions?

Might they have had an interest all along?

At the informational meeting this past March, Mr. Krishna N. Murthy, Senior Vice-President, PB and overall Programme Manager for the rail project stated that in his 33 years of experience, as far as he knows, there has been no other project in the world “where the design-build-operate-maintain DBOM contractor gets to plan the project,” and that this was an “exciting challenge.” How can PB expect an experienced DBOM contractor who has never ever had to compete on the basis of the inclusion of planning as a major component of DBOM be comfortable with the preparation of such a tender, and worse with the evaluation procedure, seeing that the evaluators have also never done this before?

Why the urgency of signing a rapid rail contract by December 2006?

It was then revealed that PB was doing a poor job on the CNTS and the Mass Transit Study (MTS) – they were already earlier fired from the MTS. This was stated by the Minister of Works and Transport in the Senate on Tuesday May 8, 2007, when insisted upon by the President of the Senate to respond to a question from the Opposition several weeks ago. He admitted that *“we are not satisfied,”* and that Government was reviewing its options,” and that we are *“giving them [PB] time to adjust their product [the final CNTS report].”*

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