

Our Transportation System is in Crisis – 98

Two weeks ago I visited the Licensing Office in Chaguanas to renew my driver's permit. I arrived about 9:00am to see a crowd gathered under the canopy area in front the building, some seated on benches and other standing around waiting. The numbers outside extended to the gate. This was almost enough to re-schedule my assignment. I could see no sign indicating what was happening, such as whether they were closed or not, or what to do upon arrival.

I decided to ask someone in the yard. He advised me to go to a table (also on the outside) and take an application form, complete it, and then submit it inside and pay your fee. It was only then that I realised that it was possible to go inside! The table was surrounded by people filling out their forms, as there was no other place for writing. Fortunately, I had a hard-cover folder and stood in the open sunshine and wrote my information. I then entered building.

There was about the same number of people inside. Some were seated on chairs against the limited wall space, due to the small size of the public area. Others were in queues, some for renewal of some sort, but most were young people applying for driver's permits. There was another queue on the other side of the room, with persons waiting to have their photo taken for processing the permit, and a clerk kept this queue at a relatively manageable number by calling persons in batches, in order to avoid it extending into the road.

While in the queue to submit the application form I had the time to scan the room. While the room was well-cooled, the air condition unit above the processing clerks appeared dirty and in an urgent need of servicing. The three or four metal cabinets behind these clerks were all old and rusted, with some of their doors not closing properly.

Some of the chairs on the side of the clerks were the worst—rusted and the upholstery torn, with the cushion material showing. What conditions for public officers to work under! Almost untenable! Yet these officers were well-dressed and dealt patiently and courteously with customers.

The cashier had no queue—people quickly paid (in my case \$200) and received their chit, and found a space inside or outside the building to wait on the call for to take the photo. After paying, I glanced across at the large number of persons awaiting processing for learner's permits, and it then occurred to me, what if first-time or renewal fees were increased to much higher rates, would there be so many drivers and potential drivers? Could that be a mechanism to address the inevitable need to reduce the numbers of vehicles using the roadways? What are the alternatives for driving your own auto, and are they suitably comfortable and convenient?

With this strategy, would anybody cancel their decision to retain a driving permit? And what will be the fee level that will facilitate such a decision and in the quantities desired? Also, will some members of the public cry discrimination against such a policy which appears to favour the financially advantaged? Will the car-less (that is, those who cannot drive due to inability or by choice, or have no access to an auto and must use public transport) rise to support a goal to reduce drivers, and by extension cars, and so free-up the road space?

While considering these ideas, I noticed a small sign at the cashier's cage stating that the Chaguanas Office was out of training booklets for the written learner examination (commonly called Regulations). I guess I was thinking aloud, as I heard someone say that "in south

they have run out as well!" Why would that be allowed to happen?

I then went outside and found some space on a bench and pulled out my Newsday copy. I heard my name and then joined the queue for photo. Upon entering the photo room I observed its very small size, yet occupied by three persons handling the equipment operation and record preparation. There was an even smaller room on the side with its door open, and with many shelves containing hard copies presumably of driving permit records. This room did not appear to be fire-proof, and the consequences of a fire were too far-reaching to continue my mental wandering!

After the photo I once again found a space on the bench outside until my name was called for the permit card. The pleasant disposition of all staff made the overall procedure so tolerable. It all took only one hour. I was so surprised at the time taken that I recognised that I had budgeted much more time for this activity, so I went to visit my ailing uncle who lives not too far away.

I hope nobody tells me that that is why it is so critical to construct an Administrative Complex for Chaguanas, which is to be located in the Woodford lodge area. Great! But, what about improving the conditions for both the public officers and their captive customers? Is their nothing to be done to alleviate the difficult conditions, and to facilitate more professional business activities.

Why not start by meeting with the staff, and inquiring about the issues which concern them! They may appeal for new furniture, and properly maintained facilities. They may also be bold as to request the introduction of appointments by phone and internet.

My next burden is to renew the passport for my young son. I have been told that I the latest that I must

enter the queue at the Immigration Office in order to meet the cut-off quantity for the day is 4:00am. So I have to wake my child at 2:00am so that we could line up and not even be guaranteed that I will be attended to on that day. Isn't it sensible to have appointments? Can somebody help me—this is one that I am anxious about! Is this a fair and reasonable way to treat our people?

e-mail: info@ccost.org