



Sunday, October 14, 2001

National Development Strategy

By Kenneth King

Road transport

We emphasized, almost at the very outset of this series of articles on the National Development Strategy, that one of the main constraints to the economic development of Guyana is the inadequacy of its road infrastructure. We pointed out that our country has about the lowest density of roads in the Americas, and that travel on our hinterland roads is rough, uncomfortable and hazardous.

The consequences of the virtual absence of this essential development requirement are many: transportation costs are high and, therefore, much of what we produce, particularly in the hinterland areas, is uncompetitive in the global market; it is difficult to attract investors to develop our natural resources; the interior is sparsely populated, while the coastal belt is overcrowded and insalubrious; and, as the authors of the NDS describe it, there is an "inequitable geographical distribution of economic activity."

Perhaps the most severe effects of our failure, over the years, to penetrate our interior and establish a network of roads have been our continuing dependence on the coastal agricultural products that have been grown since the days of slavery and indentureship; the persistent phenomenon of separate hinterland and coastal communities who hardly know one another and who do not appreciate each other's environments and culture; and our country's virtual isolation from significant commerce with the other countries on the South American continent.

In the economic chapters of the NDS, it is convincingly argued that for us to attain even a modicum of development over the next ten years or so, it would be necessary to optimise the utilisation of all our viable natural resources throughout the country, and to diversify our economy. Accordingly, the authors of the NDS have no reservations in asserting that the overall objective of the road transport sector should be "to construct a national road transport network which would provide the basis for the economic development of the entire country, and assist in the attainment of its social integration". They further specify that the road network should "provide adequate access to all the regions in Guyana to enhance their social and economic development; assist in the occupation of as much of the country as possible for security reasons; and establish road linkages with Brazil and Venezuela and, through these countries, with the rest of South, Central, and North America in order to facilitate trade."

To these ends, they propose that there should be established a road system which would be based on two main axes: a west to east axis which would run from the Venezuela border on the north-western coast of the country to Moleson Creek, on the Guyana/Suriname border, on the east; and a north to south axis which would run between Georgetown on Guyana's northern coast and the Takutu River on Guyana's southern border with Brazil.

They suggest that the development of the west to east axis should proceed in stages: the road between Georgetown and Moleson Creek should generally be widened and improved with a new highway being constructed between Enmore and the Berbice River, where a new bridge with connections to the improved road leading to Moleson Creek would be built.

Going west from Georgetown they propose the construction of a two-lane bridge across the Demerara River, near the site of the existing Demerara Harbour Bridge, which it would replace. This new bridge would have a clearance that would be high enough to enable ocean-going vessels to pass under its span. Traffic from this bridge would join the west bank Demerara Road, then the west coast road to Parika. They further suggest that a paved two-lane road should be constructed from Parika to Makouria and Anarika, along the eastern bank of the Essequibo River, and that a bridge be built across this river in the vicinity of Kokorite Island. A two-lane road going back north, and crossing the Cuyuni River would then be constructed, linking the Guyana road system with Venezuela's.

Those coastal readers who are not very familiar with the areas through which it is recommended that the western section of this west-east axis should pass, are asked to imagine a road going south from Parika towards the general direction of Bartica, but along the eastern bank of the Essequibo River, crossing that river, via an island, and then coming back up north, across the Cuyuni River to the Venezuelan border.

The north-south axis is easier to describe. It will proceed from Georgetown in the north to the Takutu River in the south, via Soesdyke, Linden, Mabura, Kurupukari, Annai, Great Hope and Lethem.

The NDS further recommends, in more detail than it is possible to present in an article such as this, that branch roads from these two axes be built in order to ramify the various regions; to connect the villages so that basic social services might be more cost-effectively supplied to them; and to tap the resources of the Intermediate Savannas, the Rupununi, and the forest and mining areas of the Potaro, Mazaruni-Cuyuni and the North-West areas. There would also be, of course, connections between existing and new roads. For example, the south-western portion of the east-west axis would be linked to the existing road which now connects Kwakwani, Ituni, Linden, Rockstone, Anarika, Allsopp Point and Bartica.

The authors of the NDS consider their road strategy to be of such great importance that they stress that these roads, when established, would "provide a network which traverses the length and breadth of Guyana; connect all the Regions of the country; give access to all its economic zones; link the country with all its neighbours; and enable easy movement within the Regions." They emphasize that the network would "also permit Guyanese to travel by road to all parts of

South America, Central America, and North America."

In order to administer and monitor the implementation of the road strategy as effectively as possible, they recommend that an autonomous highway and bridge agency be established, and urge that, in addition to performing its implementation duties, the agency should have a small construction unit to enable it to develop new road construction techniques and to train Guyanese contractors in their use.

The NDS authors were mindful of the fact that many Guyanese engineers and engineering groups are often not given road contracts on the grounds that they are both ill-equipped and ill-experienced. They therefore propose that contracting firms owned by Guyanese should be assisted through the facilitation of credit, the establishment of machinery pools, and the provision of training courses in the undertaking of large-scale road construction projects. In addition, they suggest that an appropriate schedule of user charges be formulated in order to generate revenues to replace or supplement transfers from the Central Government for road maintenance. Moreover, they recommend that a Road Maintenance Board be established, specifically to oversee the allocation of the resources obtained through the generation of maintenance revenues.

There is little doubt, however, that without massive investment it would be virtually impossible to implement the road strategy which has been outlined here. And it almost goes without saying that it would be extremely difficult for the Government alone to provide the necessary resources. Accordingly, the NDS recommends that both local and foreign investors be encouraged to participate in road construction in Guyana, through the granting of a range of incentives. In particular, it strongly suggests, that agreements be entered into through which private investors would be permitted to build, operate, and own various parts of the road system, and be allowed to recoup their investment and make reasonable profits through agreed user fees, and/or through compensation in the form of agricultural land, forests, or mineral resources.

The NDS also proposes that firms investing in large mining, forestry, agricultural or hydropower projects, which require expenditure on roads to connect their project areas to the national system, should be given a range of incentives, provided that the roads which they construct are consonant with national engineering specifications, and form integral parts of the national road plan. It also urges that local contractors be utilized to employ labour-intensive methods of road construction wherever feasible. It cannot be too strongly emphasized that all road related projects in the NDS are predicated on the necessity for them to stand the tests of environmental impact assessments.

There is little doubt that apart from the basic underpinnings of education and good governance, the road transport sector should be afforded the highest priority in the implementation of the NDS. Without the construction of the road system which it has recommended, Guyanese would be condemned not only to endure a stifling existence on the coast, but also to pursue the same occupations as their foreparents did, with little reward for their efforts.