

# Transport assets: doing development differently

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## COMMENT



I read with interest an article presented by Herbert Phahlane, director of traffic and transportation at engineering consultancy, WSP. In it, Phahlane argues that “our transport infrastructure networks are some of our most important assets” and that modern lives are increasingly characterised by our ability to travel, transport assets and goods, and to remain connected to other people in the economy.

“Just like any system would grow around a framework of infrastructure, so too do economies, because if you can’t move goods, services and people around, your economy stagnates,” he points out.

He goes on to question whether we are planning and implementing transport projects to get the most out of the opportunities that exist. “I believe not, and here I’ve outlined my views on what I believe we should be doing differently,” he says.

His first suggestion is to adopt integrated, long-term planning. “We need a long-term vision that encapsulates how people will live, work and play – and well beyond 2030. Have we undertaken any kind of impact assessment process to understand if the projects currently being fast-tracked are in fact the right projects?”

The key question Phahlane asks is: are we getting the backlog moving, increasing transport capacity and, as a direct result, influencing positive economic growth? Effective implementation, he argues, should consider the benefits for people, communities, trade and industry – in that order.

Once a vision has been established, he suggests that the bigger picture must involve the integration of major transportation infrastructure projects with provincial and municipal development. “It must also take into account planning for and the development of the critical mass of support infrastructure that feeds into and from the primary infrastructure,” Phahlane says, adding that better co-ordination is required between authorities that control primary, large-scale infrastructure and those that manage the related secondary and tertiary networks.

He notes that the private sector is a significant contributor to transport projects in the country because it currently employs the bulk of the industry’s skilled professionals. While the skills gap between the public and private sectors is a potential cause of contention, “there is, in fact, incredible scope for engagement between parties”.

This will take “a leap of faith, from all parties”. If open channels of engagement and trust can be established and cemented, however, this will “create immense opportunities for collaboration”.

His third suggestion towards a changed approach

is to adopt people-focused development. “In the past, major transport infrastructure has always been positioned around the primary movement of goods and services – and additions or adjustments are made later to accommodate people. This old way of thinking: ‘if we build it, they will come’, seldom has the desired change effect and, more often, is met with contention. We can no longer afford for how people move between spaces to be an afterthought,” he warns.

Citing the bus rapid transit (BRT) systems in Johannesburg and Pretoria, he says that, while these systems have merit in meeting the immediate needs to transport people in and out of urban and/or economic nodes, none of the systems within Johannesburg and Pretoria are integrated or connected to each other. This means that people are still limited in terms of access to opportunities within the region where they live.

Since launching these systems he says they have been fraught with challenges – such as opposition from the taxi associations and bus driver strikes – which have established a reputation for unreliability.

“The Gautrain on the other hand, which has already meaningfully contributed to GDP growth in the country since its construction, has opened opportunities along the Pretoria-Johannesburg corridor. The challenge for many people, however, is access to the Gautrain or the feeding bus stations, as these are not fully integrated with the regional public transport systems,” Phahlane points out.

“Across the country there is need to expand all modes of public transport. But, such expansions will only be as effective and successful if they are integrated into the larger regional and cross-regional transport networks,” he suggests.

“Once we can get this right, it will open opportunities to introduce universal travel and transfer rates, with a universal payment system,” he says. This also creates opportunities to cross-pollinate between transport and secondary industries such as wireless hotspots and Internet- and cloud-enabled communications to share information and updates with commuters about routes.

“It’s not a quick fix. And, getting it right will require partners who are not averse to taking a strong and forward-looking approach to plan, design, and engineer an impactful legacy,” Phahlane concludes.

Let’s stop limiting the development of transport networks and other infrastructure to our immediate needs – such the 2010 World Cup – and focus instead on helping people to live, work and move in a better, more equal, more integrated and more sustainable South Africa. □

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