

PUBLIC TRANSPORT SYSTEM TRANSFORMATION WITHIN THE CONTEXT OF GEORGE MUNICIPALITY

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ABSTRACT

Non-motorised forms of transport specifically walking, are generally the primary mode of transport in rural or non-metropolitan areas, not always as the preferred mode but often due to a failure of the public transport system to deliver a service that is accessible and affordable. This statement is substantiated by the findings of the National Household Travel Survey where walking was highlighted as the most common means of getting to work in South Africa.

In the context of the City of George, the average commuter walking distance is estimated as 5,1 km for some 45% of the workforce. (Census 2001)

This paper aims at discussing the proposed development or transformation of the current public transport regime and is considered from three main perspectives;

- The background information of the public transport system within George Municipality and the impetus behind the transformation of what could be termed a commuter service rather than a public transport service,
- The positive and negative aspects of transforming the public transport service, and
- The process of transformation embarked on in George, with the objective of commencing service operations towards the end of 2008.

The transformation concept is envisioned to provide people with the optimal level of accessibility and mobility so as to realise the aims of the Western Cape's Growth and Development Strategy.

1. IMPETUS FOR CHANGE

The notion of transforming the Public Transport System is based on the belief that a fundamental shift in approach is required in order to deliver quality public transport services within South Africa, and that this will only be achieved through full engagement with current public transport service providers. Implied is the upliftment of present licensed and unlicensed operators, and positioning of these in the formal sector as contracted operators.

The study still in progress covers the whole to the George Municipality which is some 1068 km², and includes the City of George, the costal villages of Wilderness, Harold's Bay, Victoria Bay, Klein Kraans, the Wilderness National Park, and rural settlements of Hoekwil, Wilderness Heights, Geelhoutboom, Waboomskraal and others.

It is widely acknowledged that the current public transport system is fraught with inefficiencies, conflicts and poor service delivery. While it is not the intention of this paper to revisit the inefficiencies, it is intended that this paper provides the reader with the Provincial Government's plan to improve the transport circumstances in the George Municipal area.

It needs to be highlighted that the objective of Government's interventions with public transport is not solely about providing for low income, previously disadvantaged and non-car owning communities, with a means of accessing opportunities, but to entice choice users to utilise the new public transport system. Improving the transport environment, especially the public transport system for the benefit of all the people of the Western Cape is at the top of the Provincial Government's priority list.

Public transport transformation looks at all aspects of improving and building a world-class public transport system. It is the intention of the Western Cape Provincial Department of Transport and Public Works, its partners and various stakeholders to provide a safe, reliable and affordable public transport system that puts people first.

George is undergoing sustained growth as part of a rapidly urbanising region in the Southern Cape linking with towns like Mossel Bay, Oudtshoorn, Sedgefield and Knysna, with a host of smaller communities in between. Rapid development of both economic and tourism activities and the need to link rural areas with the town have reinforced the need for improved public transport systems.

The estimated average commuter walking distance is approximately 5km for some 45% of the workforce is a reflection of a poor functioning public transport system that is not delivering an accessible or affordable service. In one of the communities in George, namely, Thembalethu, 65% of commuters are walkers, with only 26% conveyed by minibus taxis (Stats SA, 2001).

Public transport system transformation is further motivated by policy and legislation that emphatically encourages the shift from ad hoc services provided by a variety of independent and uncoordinated service providers, to a routed and scheduled system that operates at least 18 hours a day, seven days a week.

The 1997 Provincial White Paper on Transport Policy states that; "Rather than treating bus and minibus taxi as two distinct modes, each subject to their own specific regulations and controls, the entire road based public transport industry should be encouraged to grow and develop into a single entity, comprising a number of formal, well organised and well structured business units, and subject to a common set of regulations and controls. The industry would offer a range of service types with a broad mix of vehicles, supplied by a number of formally constituted organisations and groupings. The aim of Provincial support and encouragement is to assist in bringing about this change" (Western Cape Legislature, 1997).

2. TRANSFORMATION ADVANTAGES AND DISADVANTAGES

The benefits of the transformation process will extend to the community of George, including the current transport operators and the local economy as a whole.

2.1 Benefits to the community

There will be an improved travel experience, in that the service will operate in accordance with an agreed Service Quality Charter and its performance will be monitored. Accessibility

will improve, with access to social services, such as schools, clinics, hospitals, police stations, municipal offices and other such facilities available 18 hours a day at an affordable fare. The target is also to provide suitable public transport within 400m or five-minute walkable distance of each home and place of work or other amenity for at least 85% of the built area of George. With the provision of a subsidised service, unprofitable routes will be operated to benefit those people who live in sparsely populated semi-urban and rural areas.

There will also be services to the coastal villages of Wilderness, Herold's Bay, Victoria Bay, Klein Kraans, to the Wilderness National Park and to rural settlements such as Hoekwil, Wilderness Heights, Geelhoutboom and others.

Targeted is a flat-fare structure together with a ticketing system which allows for transfers within a continuous trip. Fares are to be set at below the 10% level suggested by government based on minimum wages. In effect, this results in a reduction of some 30% in current fare levels. While it is estimated the subsidy bill will be some R20m per annum, this is required to supplement community, rural and off-peak services rather than a lowering of the fare level. It is estimated that the demand for subsidy will diminish with time.

Safety and security will be improved as vehicles will be fitted with tracking devices, public transport stops will be well lit and the space around them designed to increase visibility. At the busy bus stops, there may be security personnel or CCTV surveillance. Additionally, at many stops there is the potential for formal and semi-formal trading, which would make the stops safer. Less time will be spent waiting at public transport stops as the service will run to a schedule and public transport stop spacing will ensure that there will be a short distance to walk.

Person with disabilities and special needs when it comes to travelling will be catered for, in that there will be audible door signals, visual aid marking of steps and tactile marking of handrails, seat reservations (including space for guide dogs), etc. Where practical, consideration will be given to use lower floor buses and wider entrance doors to make getting in and out easier and providing opportunities for wheelchair access.

The improvements to infrastructure and environmental upgrades will enhance the quality of life in the region, as the new system brings with it an opportunity to address various aspects of safety and security, air and noise pollution issues. In time, a clean, safe and reliable public transport system will curb the growth of private car use for everyday journeys and reduce the effects of growing congestion on the roads.

2.2 Benefits to the current operators

One of the key elements of the transformation process is the opportunity for training and empowering the current public transport operators in George. There will be sponsored educational opportunities provided in all aspects of public transport industry operation and management. All public transport operators will be provided with the opportunity during the first seven-year contract period to develop their transport operating enterprises to the point of being able to tender nationally for public and other transport contracts with confidence.

The contract, to be based on the NDoT Model Form of Negotiated Bus Contract will be of the "gross contract" format with provision for penalties and performance incentives. The gross contract format places the responsibility for the collection of fare revenue on the employer not the contractor, with the service being provided through a Public Transport Operating Trading Entity being established by the Province. It is the intention that the

contract be agreed to and commence before the end of the calendar year (2008).

In addition to the training and empowerment opportunities, there will be shareholder opportunities for legal operators (the current Operating Licence holders and vehicle owners) who are clearly the business owners of the current system and they will share in proportion to the value of their current contribution to the system.

There will be employment security with training and advancement opportunities for all. Minimum wages and all the benefits of working for a formal company will accrue to employees, including benefits such as medical aid, pension and leave. More importantly, is that the income earned by drivers and “gaartjies” will not be dependent on how many passengers are picked up, as they will become salaried employees.

2.3 Benefits to the local economy and region

The economy of George will benefit from the transformation process in a number of ways through:

- The injection of infrastructure capital on bus routes, the depot and inter-urban bus terminus.
- On-going maintenance support in order to ensure that high standards are maintained.
- Public transport operational support through subsidy.
- Resultant increased levels of disposable household income.
- Increase range of travel mode options at an affordable rate.

A further benefit will be that a more stable working and financial environment created for those involved in the local public transport industry.

In many ways, the improvement programme must also be seen in the context of the Expanded Public Works Programme (EPWP). For the infrastructural component, EPWP will be directly applicable. This includes building new public transport stops, public transport depot and holding areas, and the upgrade of some community streets to give access to vehicles for local services, together with the surrounding pedestrian environment. The operational component of the project also results in jobs being created as the improved transport system relies on the development of a wide range of skills and necessitates additional services over those currently required, such as service monitoring and independent fare collection services given a subsidised gross contract environment.

The net benefit to the local economy has been estimated, and while impressive, is currently being reviewed. The investigation has included the baselining of the current socio-economic situation with the express purpose of undertaking a post-transformation evaluation of the real benefits/disbenefits resulting from the process.

2.4 Negative aspects, threats and risks

The cost associated with the public transport transformation will be considerable. It will require investment on the part of government in the form of operating subsidies skills development funding, and expenditure on infrastructure. Some interim financing might also be required for the acquisition of vehicles, but this will be essentially an advance on payments provided for through the bus contract.

What needs to be highlighted is the fact that not all those involved in the public transport industry in the George area are going to see the transformation process as in their interests. This will particularly affect the fleet owners whose labour practices are not

always fair. In particular, labour practices and tax evasion have enabled many to achieve high profits, well beyond their earning capacity in any formal employment environment. In some instances, transformation may also be perceived as a threat to their personal independence.

One of the objectives of the transformation process is naturally, the empowerment and skills development of the role players in the industry. However, the transformation process is also based on the establishment of a formal operating environment with the associated technical and social adaptation that goes therewith. Many of these skills are completely absent from the minibus taxi industry and are often poorly represented in the smaller bus operating companies. This gives rise to two problems;

- Employing the required skills whilst training is taking place in such a way as to enable the effective operation of the new public transport system.
- Some “successful” operators will perceive the imposing of training schemes as an insult to their intelligence, dignity and pride and may resist being tested in practice. This particular problem might require considerable skill to overcome, and needs to be handled with sensitivity.

The extent of these negative aspects is an area of uncertainty that will be clarified through the negotiation and skills audit processes. At the end of the day, the decision to proceed to full implementation has yet to be taken.

3. THE PROCESS OF TRANSFORMATION EMBARKED ON IN GEORGE

Central to the improved public transport system in George is the creation of a new public transport operating entity. This single business entity would be contracted to supply all road-based public transport services to the provincial and local government. It needs to be highlighted that no one would be allowed to provide public transport services outside of this contract.

The intention is that all those operators with current, valid and active licences for the George municipal area will be eligible to participate in the creation of the business entity.

With reference to funding, the fares will be collected on behalf of the contracting authority (possibly through a separate contract) and the operator will be paid on a per-kilometre travelled basis. If costs exceed income government will subsidise the operations. In the event of profits being realised, these will be used to improve and expand services and related infrastructure.

There will be a need for management and service quality monitoring of the operating contract and fare collection process.

The system will initially comprise of 80 vehicles of three types, including mini-, midi and standard buses. These will be used to provide appropriate vehicle capacity on the routes at various times of day and night. The service will run 18 hours a day, seven days a week.

Approximately 300 locations for public transport stops have been identified, although these will be subject to public consultation. Most of these stops will be provided with simple shelters with safe, attractive waiting areas, but there is also an opportunity to promote trading and other development where appropriate.

One of the key elements of the plan is a full public transport depot with vehicle holding, maintenance, repair and fuelling facilities, as well as administrative offices. It is envisaged

that this depot will be situated in the industrial areas just north of the N2 between Sandkraal and York/Beach Roads on land owned by the municipality.

The transformation of the public transport system in George will require considerable public investment. Skills development funding from Provincial coffers will be supplemented with funding from the national Skills Development Fund. Infrastructure will be funded by the Province, whilst vehicles are to be purchased by the entity with advantage taken of the Minibus Taxi scrapping allowance through the Recapitalisation Programme.

As a result of the neglect of public transport for many years the expenditure to provide this world-class system is quite significant. While the costs are considerable the result should be a significant improvement in the local economy through both the improved transport, improved skills levels in the community and direct investment into George.

4. STEPS IN THE TRANSFORMATION PROCESS

There has been extensive work done with reference to the transformation and this section provides an overview of the broad steps on the journey to an improved public transport system, which encompasses the following;

4.1 Concept formalisation and acceptance

This process involved developing a conceptual operational plan, infrastructure needs development plan, acceptance by the senior officials, in principle acceptance of transformation concept by the MEC of Transport and Public Works and the drafting of a business plan.

4.2 Consultation, awareness creation and preparation

Broad based consultation takes place throughout the process, with the following important aspects: Discussions need to be held with, and in-principle approval sought from:

- The National Department of Transport,
- Other Provincial Departments,
- District and local municipalities and stakeholders,
- The Western Cape Provincial Taxi Council, South African Bus Operators Association and local operators, and;
- The public at large.

Engagement with the industry requires the compilation of a register of operators, drivers and linked personnel and a socio-economic and travel survey.

4.3 Conclude a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU)

With in-principle acceptance from all role players, a number of memorandums of understanding are put in place, most importantly with the current operators, so that the actions required to implement the transformation to formal public transport can commence in earnest.

4.4 Public transport and Non-motorised Infrastructure Plan Development

The development of an integrated land use and transportation plan is being compiled, which includes planning for an inter-urban and long distance public transport terminus as well as a Provincially owned public transport depot. With these plans in hand, the statutory plans (ITP and IDP for Eden and George) are being aligned with the proposals for the transformation. Establishment of bus stops, bus depot and other essential road

improvements can then commence.

4.5 Initial Training and Empowerment and System Reorientation

With this step, the competency levels within the industry are determined, with individuals in the industry then allocated to the various training programmes. These latter have to be sourced, based on the needs of a formal public transport system, and includes the obvious driver training, but also a variety of trade skills at the operations level as well as many other skills ranging from vehicle and staff scheduling through to company and human resource management

4.6 Concluding contractual agreements and establishing “Contract Operator”

This step entails entering into negotiations and contractual agreements with;

- Provincial Government of the Western Cape (PGWC) /Department of Transport and Public Works,
- PGWC/Eden and George Municipalities (also Knysna, Mossel Bay and Oudtshoorn,
- PGWC/Operators/“contracted operator”

The draft “Contracted Operator” Business Plan is compiled and the overall business plan is then updated and finalised. The Bus Public transport Operating Contract, including the routes, timetables, etc is then updated although the latter are subject to ongoing review once operations commence.

4.7 Infrastructure Implementation

The George Mobility Strategy, whilst certainly not focused on infrastructure provision, nevertheless requires considerable infrastructural development including:

- Sandkraal Road Corridor Infrastructure Implementation,
- Beach Road Corridor Infrastructure Implementation
- Knysna Road Corridor Infrastructure Implementation,
- Blanco Corridor Infrastructure Implementation,
- Central Area (including terminus and temporary depot) Infrastructure Implementation,
- Sandkraal/Southern Rural Area Infrastructure Implementation,
- Beach/Western Rural Area Infrastructure Implementation
- Knysna/Eastern Rural Area Infrastructure Implementation
- Blanco/Northern Rural Area Infrastructure Implementation
- Central/Northeast Rural Area Infrastructure Implementation
- Bus Depot Infrastructure Implementation
- General bus stop establishment throughout the network

4.8 Public Transport Operating System Implementation, Ongoing Development, Training and Monitoring

With this step the public transport fleet is ordered, and the new fare collection system and operating entity is introduced. There is ongoing training and personnel development, with system operations, business and financial monitoring taking place. Post implementation assessment is undertaken, including a socio-economic and travel survey to compare with the pre-implementation study. Public consultation and information dissemination remain ongoing.

4.9 Contract Replacement Phase (End of year 6 of contract)

The proposed first-round negotiated contract is for a seven-year period. Towards the end of this period, a tendered contract must be prepared, taking into account the form of the service provided at that time given that the service will have developed since commencing. A changeover strategy must be developed and the new tender advertised, adjudicated and awarded in time to permit a smooth transition from the current to a new contract

5. CONCLUSION

The approach outlined in this presentation represents a bold intervention which the Province of the Western Cape sincerely believes is the only logical approach that will deliver quality scheduled public transport services as required by the constitution, other legislation and government policy. In essence, the process is simple and logical, but is complicated by the reality of the current operating system, the fear and uncertainty associated with change, and the lack of adequate skills and expertise. Therein lies the challenge of meaningfully contributing to system upgrading, community upliftment, and ultimately considerable socio-economic benefits to the George community. There is no doubt that the successful implementation of this project in George will have ripple effects through the Western Cape and South Africa in general.

In closing, the authors wish to acknowledge the considerable input to the process by Ninham Shand Consulting Services.

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