



REQUEST FOR PROPOSALS TO DEVELOP A LRAIC MODEL FOR
THE TELECOMMUNICATIONS SECTOR OF TRINIDAD & TOBAGO



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Water taxi start up welcome

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It has taken all of three years since being mooted as a solution to super-congestion on the route between the country's two major cities, San Fernando and Port-of-Spain. Notwithstanding the time lapse, it is clear that the water taxi option has some potential to meet transportation needs and that commuters are willing to give it a try. Starting with the positives, the vessels offer far greater comfort than travelling on the roads by bus, taxis or regular taxis - there is an inestimable benefit here in terms of easing the wear and tear and stress on the human condition, and perhaps even contributing to a reduction in the dangerous road rage that has come over us.

The fare is also reasonable and is not too far out of line with the cost of alternative public transport. As calculated by Works and Transport Minister Colm Imbert, the water taxis are capable of ferrying approximately 6,000 passengers back and forth on a daily basis, and this he says can take 1,000 vehicles off the roadway. However, what is needed to make a full assessment of this particular benefit are the figures on the total number of vehicles on the road between Port- of-Spain and San Fernando and how many passengers go back and forth at the relevant times.

The 6,000 people and 1,000 vehicles could very well be insignificant and at an extremely high cost paid for the vessels, the upkeep of them and how far the fares will go to off-setting costs. This cost benefit approach to determining the value of the service does not mean that there should not be a subsidy paid by the Government for getting commuters to and from work efficiently and as stress-free as possible. Rather it means that the Government must tell the population the overall costs and its ability to sustain those costs over time.

There must also be a concern of the impact of the ferry service on the private taxi operators on the route. State operated services, especially if they are doing so at a significant cost to the taxpayer, should not displace private initiative especially by the social and economic class that operates taxis. This was a very painful lesson during the boom period of 1974-1983 when dozens of state enterprises which absorbed billions of dollars proved to be uneconomical when oil prices crashed to US\$10 per barrel compared to the highs of US\$34. The mistakes of the past must not be repeated.

Once again the point is made that when the state sector was dismantled after the last oil boom, the state lost billions of dollars as enterprises were sold for a song, closed never to be re-opened with the consequential negative impacts on the economy and society. As to the actual operation of the ferries so far, it is hoped that the "teething problems," which are common in any new transport-related initiative, are resolved soon so that passengers can experience the full benefits of this service.

There is also a need to remind readers that the water taxi initiative and expenditure really are only one part of an overall transportation plan of the government. The figure of \$15 billion has been projected in cost, not to say anything of the ongoing operating costs of the rail, aircraft and road infrastructure elements of the plan

The presumption must be that these kinds of analyses were made prior to bringing the water taxi service on stream ahead of other possible options and as part of the overall plan. The present administration has however been very deficient in giving detailed analyses of projects and programmes. We invite Minister Imbert, who deserves the nation's praise for the delayed execution of this project, to ensure that this is done.