Evolving urban transport policy

A Review of Critical Issues and Emerging Policy Principles

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Constitutional and institutional changes in South Africa have heralded a new round of debate about the perennial 'urban transport problem'. The Department of Transport is preparing to publish a White Paper on National Transport Policy, prior to consolidating transport legislation and implementing new policies which will affect all three tiers of government. Urban transport, and in particular passenger transport policies, are being generated through a consultative process involving all the leading stakeholders. The debate is controversial, with widely differing viewpoints being expressed about fundamental principles such as ownership, competition, regulation and the roles of the various levels of government.

This paper provides an overview of urban transport policy in South Africa. After a brief review of recent history, critical issues are discussed. A description of policy principles is provided and the paper concludes with an outline of some scenarios of the future of transport in urban areas.

A Review of the Recent History of Urban Transport

Legislation

Until the late 1970s passenger transport in South Africa was extensively regulated. Initially this was to protect the South African Railways from the competition of road-based operators. From the mid-1950s, however, strict regulation was imposed to protect both road and rail-based subsidised operators. While all the regulatory legislation remains in place, or has been updated and amended, since about 1983, transport authorities at all levels have increasingly failed to enforce many transport laws, or have deliberately liberalised the application of the legislation. An example of the latter is the liberal issue of permits to minibus-taxi operators since 1987, in line with government policy on competition (Department of Transport, March 1990).
The last twenty years have witnessed fairly wild swings in transport policy as indicated by the following:

- **The Driessen Report** (Republic of South Africa 1974) and the subsequent White Paper, which resulted in the Urban Transport Act, recommended that 'prime' rating in the ordering of national economic priorities' should be assigned to urban transport. The report further stated that the 'number of licences issued for White and Non-White transport should be subject to continuous review to keep these as close to an optimum as possible'. Driessen approved of the basic principles then being applied to subsidy payments for 'Non-White transport' and recommended a subsidy of 20 per cent on revenue for all 'public urban bus services which are not already subsidised'. Implementation of many of the recommendations did not materialise, mainly because national economic priorities were never adjusted to reflect a commitment to improve urban transport.

- **The Welgemoed Report** (Republic of South Africa 1982) favoured quasi-monopolistic rights for bus companies, the phasing out of minibustaxis carrying more than four passengers, tighter regulations and stricter action against unauthorised minibus-taxis, and re-routing of bus services to avoid parallel-running bus and rail services. Welgemoed also advocated the phasing out of bus subsidies and the adjustment of workers' salaries to enable passengers to be responsible for payment of the full economic fare. Likewise, these recommendations were never implemented and only resulted in slight modifications in the application of the Road Transportation Act.

- **The National Transport Policy Study** and subsequent White Paper on National Transport Policy (Republic of South Africa 1986) recommended a market-related transport system with more effective competition, including on-the-road competition between minibus-taxis and buses and competitive tendering for subsidised bus services. The White Paper also recommended the devolution of transport functions and financial responsibility to regional and local levels of government, restrictions on the number of minibus-taxis based on rank capacities and congestion levels, a road transport quality system and the resolution of disputes by an independent transport tribunal.

A Passenger Transport Bill (Department of Transport 1990) was drawn up as a means of legislating the changes suggested in the White Paper. The Bill was never read in parliament. Ideas about restrictions on the number of minibus-taxis were compromised by a rapid increase in the number of permits issued by Local Road Transportation Boards after 1987.