

REPORT OF THE PUBLIC CONSULTATION ON “ROAD WIDENING SCHEMES OF BENGALURU: IMPACTS AND ALTERNATIVES”

20 December 2007

A public consultation on “ROAD WIDENING SCHEMES OF BENGALURU: IMPACTS AND ALTERNATIVES” was jointly organised by Environment Support Group (ESG), Civic and Alternative Law Forum (ALF), public interest not for profit organisations responding to governance, planning, social and environmental justice causes. The consultation was held under the banner of HASIRU USIRU on 20th December 2007 at Senate Hall of Central College, Bengaluru and was chaired by Mr. P. S. S. Thomas, former Secretary General of National Human Rights Commission and Advisor, Planning Commission. Prior to the Consultation, between 4 and 5 pm there was an exhibition of survey drawings of some of the road widening proposals that Bruhat Bengaluru Mahanagara Palike (BBMP) had shared with the organisers. Various presentations and discussions followed between 5 pm and 8.30 pm.

The road widening schemes of Bengaluru are likely to result in felling of thousands of trees. In addition it would cause disruption of public life and destruction of property. The city that we know will be radically transformed – and perhaps lose its character forever. The public consultation was organised with the intention of sensitizing the public about the massive scale of the impact of road widening schemes. While the loss of trees and properties (including heritage sites) was a cause for serious concern, the consultation intended to open the debate on the issue in such a manner that there would be progressive engagement with various government agencies to find long term viable solutions than merely resorting to schemes of road widening that would only provide temporary relief.



Tree line on Palace Road – One of the 85 roads proposed to be widened.

The basis of the discussion was also the draft drawings that BBMP had shared, and which was displayed at the venue by the organisers and also widely disseminated through the media and the internet.

Though all the members of the Bengaluru Metropolitan Land Transport Authority (BMLTA) had been invited for the public consultation, only Mr. Krishna Reddy, Chief Engineer (Road Widening), BBMP, Mr. Veeranna, Director, Karnataka Town Planning Department, Mr. S. Shekhar, IFS, Deputy Conservator of Forests and Tree Officer of BBMP, and Mr. Eshwar Prasad, Assistant Commissioner, Central Traffic Division, Bengaluru City Police participated in the Panel. There were several critical audio-visual presentations made by the organising team evaluating the road widening schemes of BBMP. At the end, members of the public interacted with the panel of officials.

Challenging official ‘common sense’ : The Hasiru Usiru outlook

Opening the consultation Mr. P.S.S. Thomas set the tone remarking that the aim of the consultation was to look beyond the deceptively simple ‘commonsense’ view of “If Bangalore roads don't have the capacity to carry the growing vehicular traffic, widening them is the solution.”

Continuing this grain of thought Mr Leo Saldanha, from ESG, provided an overview of the history and efforts of the HASIRU USIRU network over the past three years. He explained how the network was an evolution of deep concerns of concerned residents of the city to ensure that traffic management solutions could be evolved without having to resort to felling trees and widening roads as the main solution. When in 2005 the city authorities proposed to widen many prominent roads, there were widespread protests against the scheme as it lacked rationale, besides resulting in widespread felling of trees. It was highlighted that the proposals at that time did not in any manner conform to the provisions of the Karnataka Tree Protection Act, Karnataka Town and Country Planning Act, the National Building Code of India or Indian Roads Congress. The main concern of HASIRU USIRU was that the proposal to widen roads was only a temporary measure to solve the traffic woes of the city. It would only be a matter of time before the roads were full again; meanwhile the natural heritage of the city, trees, would be lost forever, besides causing needless agony to hundreds of entrepreneurs and residents who would lose their properties. Further the schemes did not in any manner guarantee increased safety to pedestrians and ease of mobility to all classes of vehicle users.

He highlighted that even as the campaign to save trees was gaining strength on the streets of Bengaluru through March to May 2005, the authorities concerned seemed reticent in responding with progressive action. As a result ESG was constrained to file a PIL on behalf of HASIRU USIRU against the then proposed road widening schemes in the High Court of Karnataka.



Hasiru Usiru : Committed to saving Bangalore's greenery.

As the case was being argued, the Chief Secretary organised a series of meetings of various agencies and confirmed that any road widening programme would only be undertaken in full conformance with law and after duly consulting the public, in particular HASIRU USIRU. On the strength of this assurance of the Chief Secretary, the High Court disposed off the PIL directing the BBMP to involve ESG and HASIRU USIRU in all decisions concerning tree felling and where possible.

Relying on this order of the High Court, HASIRU USIRU and its constituent groups have worked creatively to minimise the loss of greenery in the city, and also promoted a variety of intelligent design and management options that would ensure that trees remain for posterity.

In recent months BBMP has renewed the road widening scheme with an intention to cover 85 prominent roads involving a road length anywhere between 200-400 kms. This is sought to be done in phases with the first phase alone covering 140kms. Even as this debate is being initiated, BBMP has rushed into widening of the Bellary Road and T. Chowdiah Roads. Public awareness of this scheme has increased mainly because of the awareness campaigns generated by HASIRU USIRU with active support of the media. In fact, several people affected directly by this scheme have become aware of its implications only after the designs were obtained and disseminated by HASIRU USIRU and its constituent groups. Clearly this revealed a serious lapse on part of the BBMP in not providing prior information to the affected public. In this context, the public consultation was a deliberate plan to institute a process of engagement of the public with the government agencies, and ensure that such schemes or projects are undertaken only after fully incorporating views of the wide public, especially the affected public. Such a process would allow for variety of appropriate measures to come to public attention, rather than merely technical responses of BBMP engineers, which have only provided short term relief.

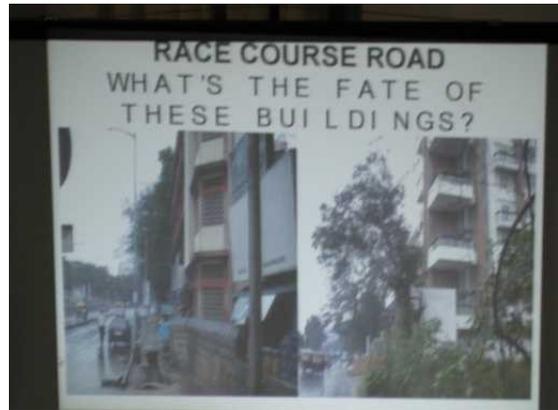
Celebrating City Streets

Ms. Bhargavi Rao, also from ESG, made a presentation which enunciated the vibrancy of the streets of Bengaluru. The presentation highlighted the fact that streets are not mere channels for vehicular traffic, and that they are also a paradise for shoppers, hangout spaces for friends, where night life flourishes, people eat out, places to demonstrate and protest, and most certainly homes for the homeless. She stressed the importance of considering the vibrancy of streets in all these respects, and that designs which failed to comprehend the multiple uses of streets would certainly affect the soul of a city adversely.

Road Widening Proposal : An ill thought out, quick-fix measure

Mr. Vijay Narnapatti and Ms. Aparna from MAYA Praxis then made a detailed presentation comparing the drawings for road widening schemes on three prominent roads, (the Nrupatunga, Kasturba and Palace Roads) with current road use and tree line patterns. They highlighted many discrepancies in the road widening designs of these roads. For instance, actual tree lines, properties and street furniture which they found during a physical survey of these roads were not indicated in the drawings. They pointed out these three roads carried most of the remaining tree cover of the city centre and any attempt to widen these roads would result in frighteningly large number of trees being lost forever. Their presentation also raised the following issues:

- Will the proposed road widening solve the traffic woes of the city? If one is not sure of this, is it worthwhile to sacrifice the last vestiges of Bangalore's tree cover, heritage buildings and crores of investment in properties to a stop-gap measure?
- Who decides road widening is warranted? Why was this decision made arbitrarily?
- Isn't a process of public consultation essential to arrive at a decision such as this, which will tremendously alter the cityscape?



Presentation highlighting the impact of proposed road widening

Mr. Ntemi Massanja and Mr. Lavanya Chandran, student interns at ESG from Christ College of Law, elaborated on these points highlighting how their physical survey of Racecourse and Sheshadri roads revealed similar discrepancies between the survey maps and the actual street architecture.

They pointed out that the survey drawings did not make any attempt to indicate the effect of road widening on several important structures. These include power transmission lines at Racecourse road, several multi storey buildings on both roads which would have to be fully or partially demolished and many buildings would lose their parking lots accentuating the problem further. They raised concerns that the survey drawings in which the width and alignment of the proposed widening is indicated in the form of red lines, does not indicate as to how the recently constructed pedestrian over bridge near Maharani College will be accommodated if the road widening scheme is undertaken. How would water, sewage and related utility lines along with optical fibre cables be moved? They too emphasised that the road widening scheme on these streets would extensively destroy the tree cover. On

Race Course Road alone, which is about 1.2km, there are 200 fully grown trees with lovely canopies that will be lost!

Road Widening in Bangalore : Violating the spirit of the NUTP

Ms. Kathyayani Chamaraj of CIVIC then dwelt at length on how the road widening scheme goes against the very spirit and import of the National Urban Transport Policy (NUTP). She highlighted that the policy especially emphasises that people, and not vehicles, must be the centre of any planning and infrastructure development process. She talked about how other traffic management measures, like instituting dedicated bus lanes, auto lanes and encouraging cyclists & public transport users need to be pursued. She lamented the neglect of the needs of pedestrians, cyclists, senior citizen and school children in such schemes. She concluded by emphasizing that long term measures to the traffic problem and not stop-gap measures must be pursued.

Suggestions on Traffic Mangement Measures

Mr. Dasarathi made the next presentation in which he observed that the present proposal for road widening is a part of the larger problem of the government pursuing transport policies that encourage private vehicle users, at the expense of public transport. He said that there needs to be a policy shift as Bangalore's limited infrastructure cannot withstand a further rise in vehicular population. The emphasis now should be to improve public transport so as to discourage the use of private transport. Public transport innovations suggested include the introduction of intra-city train as well as improving the bus system within the city.

Some measures suggested to improve public transport:

- Improve trains wherever possible
- Introduction of dedicated bus lanes
- Allow only public transport on main roads during peak hours.
- Promote autos and taxis rather than private cars and motorbikes.

Some measures suggested to discourage private transport:

- Hiking congestion fee for entering business districts.
- Ban single passenger vehicles on certain roads.
- Ban single-passenger vehicles during peak hours.
- Ban parking on main roads (or on all roads)
- Increase road taxes on private vehicles.
- Increase parking fees, with higher fee in core zones.



Exploring alternate modes of transport to counter traffic conaestion

- Cycling within localities –which have proved to be a cheap, efficient and pollution-free mode of transport in various countries such as China, France, Sweden, and Holland etc.

- Creating satellite towns so as to shift the population away from the city, in order to decongest the city.

He also pointed out the government's paradoxical pursuit of developing infrastructure in core city areas along with measures like road widening that renders all attempts at traffic management ineffectual.

Following this, Mr. Muralidhar Rao from the Koromangala Initiative elaborated upon how the government could revive public bus transport in Bengaluru. He stressed upon the importance of encouraging private players to support public transport, rather than merely making private cars. He stressed the importance of following on lines of Mangalore & Delhi to introduce competition in the provision of bus services, and claimed this would be beneficial for the end user while helping the reduction of traffic.

After the presentations by the organisers, the officials responded to some of the issues raised.

Saving Bangalore's roads from strangulation:

Mr. Krishna Reddy, (Chief Engineer (Road Widening), Bruhat Bengaluru Mahanagara Palike (BBMP)) spoke about the enormous pressure that Bengaluru's vehicular population exerted on the roads- 20 lakh vehicles ply on the roads that can carry 7 lakh; and how some measure has to be resorted to in order to prevent the roads from choking. He pointed out that BBMP was making provisions for elevated sky walks in a number of and claimed the BBMP was not blind to pedestrian concerns and environment-friendly measures. He said that road widening was being resorted to as the 27 lakh vehicular population moving in the city was causing congestion and this had to be addressed somehow. He agreed that road widening in itself, was not the final solution. He also confirmed that the decade old traffic management of the city in converting many bi-directional streets into one ways had miserably failed to support the increased traffic flow. He confirmed that there were active plans to undo the one way systems comprehensively and increase bi-directional flow and consequently the capacity of roads.

Learning from Hyderabad :

Mr. Veeranna, Director, Karnataka Town Planning Department, again stressed that the problems of burgeoning vehicular traffic was because of the huge percentage of private vehicles (75 % of Bangalore's vehicles are two-wheelers and cars) that exerted pressure on roads.



Lack of effective public transport is causing increasing numbers of Two wheelers and cars

He pointed out how citizens in Hyderabad had initially protested when 250 roads were widened, and how later they were appreciative of the reduction in traffic congestion that it brought about. He agreed that other measures like introducing high capacity buses have to be taken along with road widening, to address traffic congestion.

The difficulties of the Tree Officer :

Mr. Shekhar, IFS, Deputy Conservator of Forests and Tree Officer of BBMP also shared his experience of the difficulties in balancing his responsibility of conserving trees along with accommodating the BBMP's road widening plans for the city. He admitted that if he responded to concerns of the public in saving trees, he would be 'kicked' by his superiors for delaying tree felling in support of road widening schemes. He promised he would try to ensure that tree cover would be protected as far as possible, and that he would convey the

views expressed at the consultation to senior government officials. He also highlighted that many of the progressive suggestions made in the consultation should be implemented, and that this is possible only if higher governmental forums takes note of them.

The worries of the traffic police:

Mr. Eshwar Prasad, (Assistant Commissioner, Central Traffic Division, Bengaluru City Police) said that road widening was a stop-gap measure that had to be resorted to, because otherwise Bengaluru roads would choke to death. He pointed out that the current vehicular traffic is 32 lakh while the roads have a carrying capacity of 8 lakh. In response to Ms. Chamaraj's presentation, he elaborated on the resistance faced when the Traffic Police while trying to introduce traffic management measures like compulsory travel by school bus for children, and dedicated auto lanes on busy roads. He concluded by thanking the presenters for their valuable suggestions and said that he would represent the points raised at a higher governmental forum.

Issues that emerged during the consultation:

Following this, members of the public were allowed to raise questions & express their views about the proposed road widening scheme. Some significant issues that emerged were:

- ❖ The present road widening scheme is an ad-hoc measure, rather a carefully deliberated proposal that is part of a larger transport management plan. The BBMP has not made any study to forecast estimated increase in traffic speeds, after such widening or the estimated time period after which roads will have to be widened again, to maintain traffic speeds at this increased level. Also, this proposal is not in line with the Bengaluru Master Plan - 2015.



- ❖ The BBMP has not conducted any study to estimate the cost of rebuilding infrastructure on the roads proposed to be widened. On 85 roads, how much will it cost to move/ rebuild footpaths, electric poles, fibre optic and other cables under footpaths, traffic lights, electric poles, bus shelters and so on?
- ❖ The BBMP proposal indicates that all roads would be 4-lane (24m) or 6-lane (30 m) after widening. The BBMP's main argument was that lanes will be designed in such a manner that tree loss will only be 5 %. However, the survey drawings do not indicate how these lanes will be designed. But HASIRU USIRU members pointed out that until the designing of lanes is finalized, the actual loss of infrastructure and tree cover cannot be estimated. The Government was strongly encouraged to involve the HASIRU USIRU network in carefully addressing concerns, making a detailed inventory of trees and street structures likely to be affected by road widening.
- ❖ The BBMP has not done any study to estimate cost effectiveness of road widening vis-a- vis other alternatives of reducing traffic congestion. It was pointed out that if the whole project would cost Rs. 5000 crores, this money could be better invested in improving public transport. (Incidentally, this amount of money can buy 25,000 buses.) This would be a better investment as 50 % of Bangalore's population commute by bus.

Deconstructing popular notions of governance: The Chairperson's perspective on the Road Widening proposal

In his concluding remarks Mr. P.S.S. Thomas stressed that the core issue was whether the government was willing to search for effective, long term solutions rather than merely resorting to a temporary measure like road widening. He said that from his long years of experience in the bureaucracy he was not too hopeful about the senior bureaucracy was willing to listen to such progressive ideas from the wide public. He stressed upon the need to deconstruct and demystify the capacity of governance machineries to deliver solutions to such complex problems – emphasising the importance of public involvement in decision making.

He pointed out the tendency to rely upon techno-heavy, quick-fix measures rather than focus upon long term, people friendly measures has to be abandoned. He used the history of Bangalore's development to showcase this – the lakes of Bangalore disappeared due to quick-fix measures to accommodate the needs of a growing population, only to be realised in subsequent years that it has resulted in adversely affecting water security and diminishing the quality and quantity of public open spaces. The present proposal of road widening was similarly predicated on repeating the mistakes committed against lakes. He said some things can be done only if the government prioritizes them. In that sense he challenged senior government functionaries to think long term and progressively and set priorities by declaring that the city would be made functional based on such values as – “We won't build over Lakes”, “We won't cut trees at any cost”, “ We will make out streets pedestrian friendly”.

He said that he prays that there is a change in the government's prioritization of issues – so that people take precedence over everything else. He hoped that the organisers would continue using all the spaces and forums available to them, and be successful in influencing the prioritization of their concerns.

To conclude what was an evening that drew extensive and deep participation from all, Mr. Harish from CIVIC expressed his sincere thanks to all involved. The public consultation ended on the understanding that this should not be a one-off event. Instead it would be the beginning of a larger process of engagement with the public, if the exercise of the 20th December 2007 was to be meaningful in the long term.



Mr. P.S.S. Thomas, former Secretary General of National Human Rights Commission chaired the consultation

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Note:

1. All presentations made during the consultation are available online at www.esgindia.org
2. The designs for some roads of the road widening schemes can be downloaded from www.esgindia.org
3. Video recording of proceedings are available on CD from CIVIC.

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