

How To Eliminate Congestion on Third Mainland Bridge (1)

The congestion problem in Lagos has increased significantly in comparison to what obtains some decades ago. This problem is quite severe during morning and evening travel peak periods on Third Mainland Bridge (TMB) where commuters spend hours waiting in traffic every weekday. To date, efforts by the state to curb the congestion problem have produced marginal result. Take as an example, the implementation of the Bus Rapid Transit (BRT) scheme; besides replacing the once very popular and dangerous "Molues" in Lagos, the scheme has not met the main performance criterion of encouraging a significant proportion of car owners to drop their cars at home in favour of using the bus. My personal experience on TMB enroute the Island compelled me to devote this piece to suggesting ways to combat this wicked problem. As it is with all forms of wicked problems, it cannot be considered understood until a solution that works has been developed. The fact that the congestion problem has lingered for years implies that the problem is not yet understood thereby creating room for new thinking. Having studied the problem, I now present some pragmatic solutions to the problem. I strongly believe that by carefully implementing the suggestions presented in this article series, reduced congestion levels would result.

The solutions presented here are based on the premise that by avoiding traffic breakdown on available road space, vehicle throughput (number of vehicles per minute) across the road section can be increased. This traffic management approach is known as Travel Demand Management (TDM) and its ultimate goal is to ensure that road space is never over utilized while also maintaining utilization at levels just below breakdown point as much as possible to ensure maximum throughput. Since the congestion experienced on TMB occurs mainly during morning and evening peak travel times, it is clear that it is not caused by insufficient capacity but by temporary spikes in travel demand at peak times. This congestion characteristic makes the TMB a prime candidate for the adoption of TDM as the strategy to help minimize the effect of high temporary demand and to prevent flow breakdown. Examples of TDM approaches include the introduction of flexible working arrangements for staff by both private and public sector organizations domiciled on Lagos Island, Victoria Island, Lekki, Ikoyi and environs. In other major economic cities, car parks, "park and ride" services and congestion charges have been introduced to discourage lone driving into the commercial centre. Other TDM options available include introduction of car sharing and car pooling schemes. Details of how these TDM approaches can be applied to solve the congestion problem on TMB are presented in consequent paragraphs.

As mentioned above, instituting flexible working arrangements for staff by companies located on the Island can help minimize the effect of the temporary surge in travel demand on TMB. As an illustration, if most of the offices on the Island implement a flexible work resumption time of between 7.00am and 10:00am, then peak hour travel where most people endeavour to get to the Island at the same time, e.g. 8:00am, wouldn't be necessary. The same also follows that employees that start work earlier could finish earlier thus resulting in more predictable journeys in the evenings as well. Other variation of flexible working arrangements include situations where certain employees can opt to work part time either by number of hours a day or by number of days in a week depending on individual circumstances or lifestyle requirements. Whatever approach to flexible working is chosen, to achieve the desired goal of lower peak traffic levels, institutional cooperation among most of the companies on the Island

is necessary. By this I mean, majority of the banks, telecommunication companies, government institutions and other organizations with offices on the Island must agree or be persuaded to institute flexi-working arrangements for greater the benefit of all.

Lone driving whereby a car has only one passenger is one common feature on TMB that needs to be done away with. The fact that one can afford a car should not mean that it has to be used on every journey. Compared to elsewhere in the world such as in Europe and America, it is relatively cheap to run and maintain a car in Nigeria and this has contributed immensely to the congestion problem. For example, in the UK in addition to high fuel and car maintenance costs, drivers have to worry about regular insurance payments, annual road tax, congestion and parking charges. These expenses have made driving in the UK to be an economic decision since viable cheaper alternatives are readily available. I am not advocating the introduction of any of these expenses in this article but simply pointing out that a car should only be used when it makes the most sense. It is time to outgrow the era of extravagance whereby several employees of the same organization and other organizations located within the same vicinity travel in lone cars to work despite living in the same neighbourhood and travelling on similar routes to work.

While seriously discouraging lone driving on TMB, alternatives such as corporate car pooling and car sharing should be loudly promoted. If most organizations located on the Island were to institute corporate car sharing and car pooling policies, the population of cars making daily journeys to the Island could be significantly reduced. By actively rewarding employees who opts for cheaper, more sustainable travel means, others may be enticed to follow suit thereby increasing participation across the organization. For example, companies may start charging for parking spaces while also making free parking available to car sharers. Other reward schemes may include free fuel or meal tickets to car sharers on a daily or weekly lottery basis. Whatever benefits and reward scheme is selected to encourage car sharing, the key goal should be such that sustainable travel is promoted. If half of the number of car owners travelling daily on Third Mainland Bridge decides to car share with other regular lone travellers on the same route, this would result in an automatic reduction in traffic levels by a significant proportion.

So, having highlighted two simple but yet compelling TDM approaches, one can start to see that the congestion problem on TMB is not insurmountable. What we need are new thinking, new practices and the zeal to make a difference by each and every one of us. I believe that with the government and its transport institutions playing active roles through instituting policies, regulations, enforcement frameworks and creating an enabling environment for private sector participation, speedy adoption of TDM practices by the wider public would result.

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