

## Suggestions for reducing congestion on Manekji Mehta Road

A proposal has been mooted to widen Manekji Mehta road from the existing two lanes to four lanes in an attempt at reducing traffic congestion this road. However, such a widening will have a negative impact not only on the tree cover and bio-diversity of the region, but also on the security of a sensitive military zone, and the congestion problem itself which the widening is meant to solve. This document discusses the pitfalls of the proposed solution and suggests three alternative solutions to solve the problem of Manekji Mehta Road.

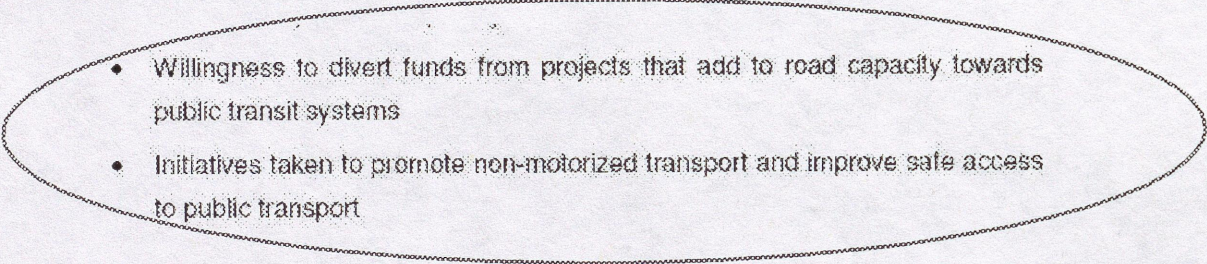
### *Problems with proposed widening*

#### **Transport perspective**

It is now well accepted in transport planning circles in India and around the world that increasing road width alone does not help solve traffic congestion problems. Instead, it only induces more vehicles to get on to the road and thus exacerbates the problem it was meant to solve. Infact, we all are witness to this. Examples abound from Pune, India and the world:

- Ganeshkhind road is as choked now as 10 years ago in spite of road widening, tree cutting and flyover building.
- Bangalore has also extensively widened its roads to no avail.
- Atlanta, Bangkok, UAE and Los Angeles are well known examples of road widening not solving traffic congestion problems.

Instead, improved facilities for public transport, pedestrians and cyclists are the cornerstones of improvement in urban transport. These views are also echoed in policy statements issued by the Government of India, such as the National Urban Transport Policy (2006) and the Report of the Working Group for the 11<sup>th</sup> Five Year Plan on Urban Transport including MRTS. Figures 1 to 4 present some relevant snippets from these documents and a recent newspaper interview with an international expert on urban transport. We will be happy to share the complete documents with you if desired.

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- Willingness to divert funds from projects that add to road capacity towards public transit systems
  - Initiatives taken to promote non-motorized transport and improve safe access to public transport

**Fig 1: National Urban Transport Policy, page 9**

**Equitable allocation of road space**

11. At present, road space gets allocated to whichever vehicle occupies it first. The focus is, therefore, the vehicle and not people. The result is that a bus carrying 40 people is allocated only two and a half times the road space that is allocated to a car carrying only one or two persons. In this process, the lower income groups have, effectively, ended up paying, in terms of higher travel time and higher travel costs, for the disproportionate space allocated to personal vehicles. Users of non-motorized modes have tended to be squeezed out of the roads on account of serious threats to their safety. If the focus of the principles of road space allocation were to be the people, then much more space would need to be allocated to public transport systems than is allocated at present.

12. The Central Government would, therefore, encourage measures that allocate road space on a more equitable basis, with people as its focus. This can be achieved by reserving lanes and corridors exclusively for public transport and non-motorized modes of travel. Similarly, lanes could be reserved for vehicles that carry more than

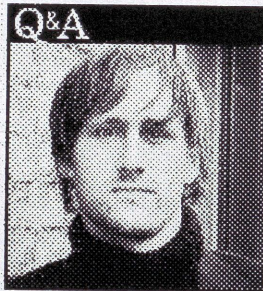
**Fig 2: National Urban Transport Policy, page 6**

Transport Policy. Thus, proposals for well evaluated and meaningful public transport facilities and non-motorized modes should receive priority over road widening. It would be desirable for

**Fig 3: 11<sup>th</sup> Plan Working Report on Urban Transport, page 8**

**'Walking is crucial to achieving urbanity'**

*Urban Age, a joint initiative of the London School of Economics and Political Science and Deutsche Bank's Alfred Herrhausen Society, has undertaken a research programme in four Indian cities (Delhi, Mumbai, Kolkata and Bangalore) to assess how they are responding to the challenges of growth. Its executive director Philip Rode spoke to Nodan Raaf.*



■ What are the challenges that confront Indian cities?

The enormous growth rates often overtake the planning effort. Further, cities operate with outdated plans and laws. There is weak enforcement and a general implementation deficit. There is a shortage of professional planners and the need for planning skills that match today's dynamic growth of cities. Finally, the synchronisation of land use and transportation needs to be an enormous difficulty.

■ Urban Age has compared Indian cities to New York, London and Berlin. Which is the best model to follow?

Berlin and London offered a set of promising approaches for greater integration. Having a city-wide government with a political mandate is a crucial prerequisite for any strategic planning exercise.

Unified urban development departments which combine transport, land use, urban development, housing and city planning) at the city state and national levels as in Berlin further improve the level of interdisciplinary work. Another example is a multimodal transport agency (like in London) that is responsible for all transport modes ranging from walking and cycling to public transport and road traffic.

■ The report mentions that 55 per cent of people walk to work in Mumbai while 32 per cent do so in Delhi. But are pedestrians a focus at all for city planners?

Unfortunately, not enough attention is given to pedestrians. It is only now that many cities are and cycling as an integral part of the transport modes. Walking is of enormous importance, not only because it is the core transport mode

that is an inherent part of all other modes but also because it is by far the most important means for active involvement in public spaces.

■ Are more roads and commuter systems like the metro the answer to traffic congestion?

More roads are certainly not the answer. While there are cities that have tried to adjust to car use as the dominant mode of travel, they had to literally destroy the city. What is left in these cases is an unrecognisable agglomeration of urban sprawl with parking lots, shopping malls and highways. There is a maximum level of motorisation which cannot be exceeded. Metro systems are an important component of urban transport for large cities. However, the cost for implementing particularly underground rail is enormous. BRT is far more effective in delivering high capacity public transport with a wider reach within the metro region.

**Fig 4: Interview with Mr. Rode, Times of India, June 23<sup>rd</sup> 2008**

Therefore, it would be a folly to imagine that widening Maneckji Mehta road will solve the traffic congestion problem in the region.

**Environment perspective**

The cantonment area is exemplified by most citizens as one of the greenest, and coolest, parts of Pune. It has a rich variety of indigenous and diverse flora that has been maintained for a very long period of time. It is also very heartening to see new plantations in different areas in the Pune Cantonment Board (PCB). The landscaping in certain parts of the PCB, like in front of the Southern Command Headquarters, adds the cherry to the cake. While Pune city has been losing an average 900-1000 trees every month, PCB has been one of the areas standing

apart from this abominable trend. Therefore, the news of felling more than hundred trees on one stretch of a road is particularly shocking.



The trees and green elements not only add to the aesthetics of the area (see pictures above) but also provide a habitat for birds and other reptiles. The small beautiful landscaped garden maintained by the PCB also acts as an important water retention zone. Moreover, people directly benefit from the shelter and refuge provided by these green areas, as the following pictures testify.



While looking at the debate between trees and roads, the implications of losing or degradation of microclimates gets missed out completely. Trees greatly help in lowering the temperature and making the air in the area cleaner and purer. The removal of the trees either through felling or transplanting will take away these qualities from Maneckji Mehta Road. Trees, of course, also act as a carbon sink and help mitigate the adverse effects of global warming. Therefore, cutting these trees and eliminating the green area would lead to environmental degradation and a deteriorated quality of life not only for citizens of PCB but all of Pune.

### **Security perspective**

It is also likely that increasing the width of the road passing directly in front of the Southern Command headquarters would permit traffic to approach dangerously close to the perimeter wall of the Southern Command, thus constituting an increased security risk in a sensitive military zone. Currently, a buffer zone of at least 30 feet is available between the compound wall of Southern Command and the moving traffic and this zone would get reduced if the road carriage width is widened.

## ***Suggested solutions***

### **Solution 1: Enabling greater commuter through-put**

This solution is based on two insights:

- The congestion problem on Maneckji Mehta road is a peak-hour problem. Therefore, it requires a peak-hour solution, rather than a solution that permanently widens the road.
- As stated by the National Urban Transport Policy and the 11<sup>th</sup> Plan Working Group Report on Urban Transport, the purpose of urban transport infrastructure is to enable people to commute rather than vehicles.

Therefore, the ideal solution to the problem, given current constraints, would be to restrict the movement of traffic on Maneckji Mehta road during peak hours to allow only pedestrians, cyclists and public transport buses (including company buses since they carry many people), and ask the inefficient modes of transport (namely cars, two- and three-wheelers) to use other routes. Of course, exceptions may be made for important army vehicles and emergency services such as ambulances and fire engines. Such a solution would have multiple advantages:

1. It would require no expense on the part of PCB, other than deploying some personnel to manage traffic at peak hours to enforce the restriction.
2. Pedestrians, cyclists and public transport users would get the credit and incentive they deserve for using sustainable modes. It may even encourage few others to shift to such modes, where possible.
3. It would protect the tree cover and the resultant bio-diversity, thus helping both PCB and Pune citizens.
4. Considering that PCB organizes the MG road walking plaza and has converted AFMC into a no-vehicle zone, such a move would send out yet another message that PCB encourages sustainable modes of transport and practices protection of green cover and bio-diversity.
5. It may pressurize other city localities and PMC to adopt similar policies that will benefit both the socio-economic fabric and the environment of the city.

### **Solution 2: Limited road widening**

If, for some reason, the solution proposed above is not feasible and cannot be implemented, an alternative (though inferior) solution is also provided. This would involve widening of the road only from the War Memorial up to the left turn just before the barricade preventing heavy vehicles from entering Maneckji Mehta Road. A site survey established that this is the section of the road that has the greatest traffic load, and the section on which heavy vehicles are not allowed has relatively less traffic. Since the stretch with less traffic is also the stretch with many important army offices and with the greatest diversity of trees and gardens, at the very least this stretch should be preserved. Widening the road from the War Memorial to the junction before the heavy vehicle barricade would result in the loss of some trees and green area. However, this may be acceptable as a compromise solution to deal with the problem.

### **Solution 3: Combination of solutions 1 and 2**

It is also possible to combine the two solutions mentioned here. This solution would limit traffic in the section currently off-limits for heavy vehicles to only public transport buses, pedestrians and cyclists during peak hours. In addition, it would also widen the road between the War Memorial and the left turn before the

current barricade location. This solution would be worse than Solution 1, but better than Solution 2.

### ***Conclusions***

Road widening cannot solve traffic congestion problems, unless accompanied by other measures to improve public transport, pedestrian and cycling infrastructure. Trees, gardens and other green cover in Pune are rapidly diminishing and must be viewed as precious resources not to be squandered away. Therefore, widening Maneckji Mehta road by cutting trees and destroying gardens will not solve the problem and degrade the city's liveability. As an alternative, this document proposes three other solutions that try to solve the traffic problem and protect the tree cover.

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