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The Karachi Elevated Expressway

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METRO VOICE

THE Karachi City Government has decided to build an elevated expressway, called the Karachi Elevated Expressway (KEE) from Jinnah Bridge to Quaidabad. The Expressway will pass over Moulvi Tamizzuddin Road, Club Road and Sharea Faisal. is to relieve congestion on Sharea Faisal and provide a fast link between Karachi Port and Port Qasim for port related traffic. The narrowest section of the corridor through which the KEE will pass is from the PIDC to Napier Barracks. This stretch is Karachi's potential tourist area and contains its main five star hotels, Gymkhana Club, Sindh Club, Quaid-e-Azam Museum and Napier Barracks (which are heritage buildings). Frere Hall is also in close proximity. In this stretch the KEE will cover almost the entire road width.

As required under law an Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) has been carried out by consultants hired by the proponent. The EIA findings are that the adverse affects of the KEE are minor and can be mitigated. At a public hearing on the EIA citizens and professional bodies expressed serious concerns on the concept and design details of the KEE. However, the design details and the financial feasibility are of secondary importance. It is the concept of an elevated expressway through the most prestigious corridor in Karachi that needs to be questioned.

The EIA has stated that elevated expressways in other countries have solved traffic problems similar to the ones faced by Sharea Faisal and that there is no other solution to these problems apart from constructing the KEE.

This view conflicts sharply with a large body of technical and academic literature on transport engineering and with the experience of a number of cities that have constructed elevated expressways through their city centres. Bangkok, Manila, Tehran, Cairo and Dubai have all constructed scores of kilometres of expressways. These expressways have not solved traffic problems and traffic conditions in these cities are far worse than Karachi. Dubai, which is nearest to us in geographical terms, is grid-locked for six to eight hours a day.

No country in the developed world today would ever dream of building an expressway to their city centres because of the environmental and aesthetic degradation that they cause. As a matter of fact, San Francisco, New York, Boston, Seoul and Paris have actually demolished their expressways and turned them into public space or housing.

This demolition has relieved traffic congestion because it has been accompanied by better traffic management, the development of a larger traffic and transportation plan, segregation of local and thorough traffic and/or the building of segregated bus ways which have supported people opting for taking the bus rather than using a car.

In our case none of these alternatives have been explored and nor is the KEE a part of a larger traffic and transportation plan. This was recognised by the consultants during the public hearing.

There are also financial issues that have not been seriously studied.

The investment by a foreign company for the KEE is to be recovered by a toll on vehicles using the KEE. At the hearing we were informed that the traffic volume on Sharea Faisal that would use the KEE was not sufficient for the company to recover their investment.

As such, it has been decided to divert all port related traffic onto the KEE in spite of the fact that other options such as the very feasible routes of the Southern and Northern Bypasses are available.

So we will now have trucks, container vehicles and tankers plying overhead the Sharea Faisal in addition to encroachment on urban space and the denial of sun light in the narrower confines of our most prestigious corridor. Again, this decision conflicts with experience for cities like Bangkok, Seoul and Manila are trying to limit or ban heavy traffic on their inner city expressways. Boston has demolished the expressway carrying heavy traffic and in Riyadh the pollution of the expressway passing through the city was so heavy that they decided to vacate the areas on either side of it and forest them. In addition, the Institute of Architects Pakistan (IAP) has pointed out that for an average toll of Rs 20 per vehicle, 143,835 vehicles per day would be required to use the expressway. Where they will come from is not known.

The building of the KEE is an ad-hoc and ill-informed decision. It is the expressed desire of the city government to turn Karachi into a “world class city”. The building of the expressway will certainly not help in achieving this objective