

The News (03-04-2007)

An elevated environmental risk

In spite of the widespread criticism that it has received since it announced the project, the City District Government Karachi has elected to plough ahead with the proposed elevated expressway along the M. T. Khan–Sharea Faisal corridor. The criticism has come equally from the planning and design community as from other stakeholders and citizens. The CDGK has single-handedly conceived of this massive infrastructure undertaking, without fully understanding the complex dynamics of the traffic problems in Karachi and has proposed to solve the perceived problem with a single stroke which will rend a gash through the fabric of the most vital and commercially viable parts of the city.

In spite of the fact that it administers only about 34 per cent of the city of Karachi, the CDGK has none the less taken it upon itself to supposedly solve the traffic problems of the entire city. The elevated expressway promises to relieve the traffic congestion on Sharea Faisal as well as provide a southern bypass for heavy freight traffic travelling from Karachi Port to the National Highway. In the administrative patchwork that characterises the city of Karachi any expressway project should be conducted through the collaboration of all affected agencies. It is therefore curious that even though the current southern truck route from Karachi Port to the National Highway runs through DHA, the CDGK has taken it upon itself to alleviate this problem at its own cost and environmental risk. It seems oddly magnanimous of the city nazim.

Last month, in conformance with the requirements of the Pakistan Environmental Protection Act, the CDGK submitted an Environmental Impact Assessment Report to the Sindh Environmental Protection Agency. A study of this two volume, 264-page document reveals that it is full of unsupported assumptions, general statements and irrelevant data. The report is largely intended to fulfil a legal requirement and it provides little concrete information about the environmental impact of the project or any cogent steps for avoiding or mitigating this environmental damage.

According to the report, the elevated expressway will in effect place an 18 metre wide canopy over the entire length of the M T Khan Road–Club Road–Sharea Faisal corridor, partially or completely covering -- depending on its width -- the at-grade roadway. The width of the right of way (ROW) of the resultant elevated expressway and the at-grade road varies from 23 metres where the road is tight and can only allow two lanes, two-way traffic, to 39 metres where four lanes, two-way traffic is possible below the elevated expressway. At the exit points, the space for ramps and tollbooths push the width of the ROW to over 50m. The height of the clearance of the expressway will vary from 5.4 metres to more than twice that to clear existing flyovers.

In order to achieve this ROW widening exercise, the CDGK hopes to acquire "very small" strips of land at intervals along the entire length to "redefine the ROW". Specifically, this means acquisition of land from the Bahria Complex, Pakistan Central Cotton Committee, the PC hotel, Karachi Gymkhana, Qasr-e-Naz and the State Guest House, Sindh Club, Hotel Avari and the Quaid-e-Azam House! The "very small" strips of land add up to nearly 15 acres.

Shahrah-e-Faisal was never planned as a high-speed expressway corridor. A pre-partition route, it is pinched in many places and often crowded by new and old buildings. The elevated expressway will follow the alignment of this corridor. Along its length the elevated expressway will fly over the old Lover's Lane Bridge at PIDC, squeeze between the PC and Sheraton hotels, crowd past Shafi Court, Hotel Metropole, Hotel Avari, Quaid-e-Azam House and Hotel Mehran. It is expected that the ride on the elevated expressway will have the feel of a gentle roller coaster.

The worst condition is along Club Road between PIDC and Hotel Avari. Here the narrowness of the existing roadway will effectively create a tunnel. The EIA report admits that the construction here "will be problematic since it may require the removal of existing landscape features ...

followed by appropriate restoration of landscape." The "existing landscape features" refers to the giant trees that have lined Club Road in front of Karachi Gymkhana ever since the British laid out the modern city of Karachi.

The "appropriate restoration of landscape" must mean plastic potted plants because nothing else will thrive in the tunnel. The expected air pollution levels here are so high that the report recommends that "the impact would be suitably mitigated by an exhaust system such as those provided in tunnels or underground transport systems." The report also mentions that the "problem is now compounded" by the addition of a VVIP exit ramp on Club Road in front of the DCO office." As if we had any doubt who this project is really intended for. It is unclear how this will impact the city's three leading hotels or the normally moribund tourist industry.

The rest of the corridor does not fair much better. The construction of the expressway will most certainly result in the destruction of all trees and vegetation on the median of M T Khan Road and Sharea Faisal. The vegetation on the median is dismissed as mostly "hedges which are not radiation sensitive" even though the accompanying table lists nearly 1,100 surveyed trees on the median including 242 neem trees. After construction the CDGK proposes to replace these mature trees with "vegetation that survives under low levels of solar radiation".

I guess that would consist of ferns and mushrooms. The EIA report 'infers' "that the vegetation in the . . . sides will not be impacted by the construction" This is factually incorrect since the realignment of the ROW to accommodate the structure of the expressway and especially the toll plazas at the exits will not only result in destruction of trees but will probably also impact sidewalks, service lanes and parking. Interestingly, all the trees surveyed along the corridor are either between five and seven feet in height or taller than seven feet -- as if the surveyor was handicapped by an inadequately small measuring tape. This is statistical nonsense because it underplays the actual sizes of the many mature trees along the route.

The issue of the noise and air pollutions is dealt with in an equally cavalier manner. The results of a recent air quality study are quoted and it is concluded that the accumulated air pollution will disperse to acceptable levels within 50 metres. Unfortunately, along much of its length the expressway is hemmed in by tall commercial properties and does not have the luxury of the required space for dispersal. There is no mention of the pollution levels under the expressway. No samples were taken under any of the existing flyovers in the city. However, a recent study by PEPA on the nitrogen dioxide (NO₂) levels in different parts of Karachi shows the Karimabad intersection having NO₂ levels four times higher than the worst industrial areas of the city. The only thing unique about Karimabad intersection is that it sits under the Liaquatabad flyover.

There is much more self-serving justification in the EIA report but what is clear is that the CDGK is proposing to commit an atrocity in our city. This obscene rush to acquire the worst accoutrements of big cities is going to result in permanent irreparable damage to the urban fabric of this city. It is up to the citizens of Karachi to speak up at the EPA public hearing on the third of April and reject this project.