

Breakfast with the Honourable Prime Minister

Statement by Victoria Hobday, President TTSP

17 January, 2018

What is the purpose and value of land use planning in Trinidad and Tobago you might ask? Perhaps you think that planning exists simply to frustrate development aspirations, as I suspect that many, if not all of you have stories of your frustrations in seeking to secure planning permission. This is a major problem, and I would not care to guess how many projects are currently tied up in the Town and Country Planning Division and appeal system, that could otherwise be contributing to much needed economic stimulation. I have more than one project tied up, and I am just one planner.

However the management of development through what is popularly called the development control process, is only part of the function of planning. Planning is about more than just land and buildings, which unfortunately seem to be our main preoccupation in Trinidad and Tobago. In essence, planning is an approach which manages the distribution of people and activities, in spaces of various scales - national, regional and community. It involves the coordination of practices and policies which affect how our urban and rural spaces and activities are organized.

You will appreciate that there are many different factors which influence the organization of space, including built development, transportation and accessibility considerations, social and cultural customs, economic drivers and so on. The real role of planning is to coordinate and reconcile all of these at times seemingly conflicting factors, in the interests of enabling a sustainable, coherent and rational use of land. Public consultation and participation must also be integral parts of the planning process.

This is articulated through written and graphic plans and policies, which define the goals for the future of the space, and outline the road map for getting there. Such plans and policies should of course be regularly updated to ensure that they continue to be relevant and appropriate. Development proposals which are the subject of planning applications, are then evaluated against these plans and policies. Sounds good doesn't it?

The problem is that we do very little actual development planning in Trinidad and Tobago. There is a National Physical Development Plan that came into effect in 1984, and which has not been updated since. There is a National Spatial Development Strategy (NSDS) completed in 2014 which seems to have no locus standi. There are a number of policies which are obsolete, and bear no relation to what is happening on the ground. There are other policies, the genesis and status of which are often unclear and secret, and which frequently change with government administrations without notice. So at the best of times, there is a lack of clarity and consistency as to what constitutes policy, such that investors, property developers and development consultants operate almost with guesswork. To be fair to my colleagues in the public service,

this is as much a problem for planners in TCPD, as it is for those of us who have to interface with them in seeking approval for development.

The lack of development planning in Trinidad and Tobago means that development is largely driven by flavour of the day projects, in which the inclusion of planning feels like an afterthought. Strategic development decisions seem, for the most part, to be made on an ad hoc basis, without due consideration to the wider socio-economic and environmental implications. Like ripples in a lake, the consequences of these decisions are often felt more widely and for far longer than understood.

We continue to face a number of challenges as a nation, including decaying town centres, growth of informal settlements and squatting, urban sprawl and inefficient use of land, environmental degradation, traffic congestion, economic contraction and of course, ever growing levels of crime and disorder. It is easy to point the finger at global economic instability, declining oil and gas revenues, and the much-touted increase in gangs. However I assure you that the continued sidelining of planning has played a pivotal role in creating our current national reality.

The profession itself is another casualty, with bright, young, planning professionals becoming understandably demoralized by the dysfunctional system in which they are seeking to make a difference, with the result that they leave either the profession or the country. The outlook for planning appears bleak.

Yet planning and planners have important roles to play in realizing a better future than our present. However, a better future requires a major change from our current trajectory. For our part, the TTSP is committed to partner with the Government through the Ministry of Planning and Development, the private sector and civil society, to strategize on and support the implementation of initiatives that have the potential for wide reaching benefits at all levels of society.

We wish to strenuously propose the following:

- Update of the current planning legislation that is over 50 years old, and firm decisions on amendments recommended for the partially proclaimed Planning and Facilitation of Development Act;
- Progress in the institution of the Urban and Regional Profession Bill that will regularise the functions of planners, architects, and engineers. We have been in consultation with the Ministry regarding this Bill and we look forward to its passage into law at the earliest possible time;
- Decisive action to streamline and speed up the planning permission process;
- Making public the relevant plans and policies currently used by TCPD in determining applications.

At the start of a new year, this is the ideal time for us all to resolve to start taking real steps to move forward differently.