

Sustainable Urban Transport Visioning in Central America – A Future without the Car?

Eric N. Schreffler, ESTC, San Diego, CA, USA (corresponding) estc@san.rr.com

Nydia Mirabel Umaña, Urban Transport Technical Unit,

City of San Pedro Sula, Honduras

Pedro Salvador Garcia Moreno, Urban Transport Technical Unit,

City of San Pedro Sula, Honduras

Caroline Mattsson, Transport Consultant, Sweden (formerly with ETT, Madrid, Spain)

ABSTRACT

Is it conceivable to contemplate a future without the car as the center of an urban transportation system? Can emerging economies grow without concomitant growth in car usage? San Pedro Sula, Honduras, is one city at a critical decision point about the future of transportation and mobility. Will it be a sustainable transport future that balances economic, environmental and social needs or will it be the traditional “predict and provide” approach that attempts to expand the capacity of the road system to meet future travel demand. This paper provides some background into the issue for this Central American city by describing the current urban transport system, current plans for improvement and outlines a process for defining a vision for a sustainable transport future in San Pedro Sula. The paper concludes with a challenge to all cities that currently have low automobile ownership rates to consider a sustainable transport system in order to “thrive” with transport choices for all residents rather than “choke” on congestion and the negative side effects thereof.

Keywords: sustainable urban transport plan, accessibility, mobility, visioning, travel choices

INTRODUCTION

Urban transport in Central America is evolving in many countries as cities work to replicate some of the experiences and innovations in Latin America. These include the Bus Rapid Transit (BRT) projects in Columbia, Brazil, and in Guatemala. While BRT has been a significant improvement in mobility and safety in the cities in which it was implemented, it needs to be part of an overall vision of sustainable urban transport. Such a vision needs to include all travel markets (e.g., commuters, students, visitors, residents), all modes (driving alone, public transport, bicycle, walk, shared ride, even trip elimination (e.g., trip chaining, tele-learning, etc.)) cover all policy objectives (congestion, energy, environment, economic decoupling, social inclusion, etc.) and suggest needed institutional reforms. Such a vision (Vision 2020) has been created in Guatemala City and Bogota, which included BRT, but also included non-motorized modes, institutional reform, and other innovations.

This paper will outline the needs and prospects for developing a Sustainable Urban Transport vision for the City of San Pedro Sula, Honduras. San Pedro Sula is the second largest city in Honduras and the so-called “industrial capital” of the nation. Honduras is one of the most severe poverty and security situations in the Western Hemisphere. San Pedro Sula is experiencing severe problems due to the growth in car use. The paper will present the current situation for urban transport in terms of economic growth, congestion, safety, and public transport and goods delivery services. The Urban Transport Technical Unit of the Municipality of San Pedro Sula has made tremendous strides in organizing and consolidating public transport and goods movement to remove busses and trucks from the city center and to improve traffic flow by relocating street vendors, implementing one-way couplets, and initiating parking management. However, some initiatives have failed, such as “no drive days” imposed in April 2008 to reduce fuel use and there fuel subsidies.

Stakeholders in San Pedro Sula were introduced to the concept of integrated Sustainable Urban Transport in March 2008. The theme of that discussion was “Can you imagine a future without the car?” Since that time, staff have learned more about the Vision 2020 plan in Guatemala City and have initiated conceptual planning on a BRT system, preliminarily called METROSULA. The City is undertaking a structured process to create a common vision of sustainable urban transport to include all three aspects enumerated above (travel markets, modes, policy objectives and institutional arrangements). The paper will outline the vision created in San Pedro Sula and provide an objective review of the process for combining technical and policy strategies into an integrated vision and It will provide a benchmarking to other Latin American experiences, Finally, it will conclude with a sense of the next steps and key future conditions for the successful realization of the vision for San Pedro Sula.

PURPOSE AND BACKGROUND

The purpose of this paper is to describe the conditions underlying and need for a sustainable urban transport plan for San Pedro Sula, Honduras. Transport and traffic management in San Pedro Sula has made tremendous strides in the past 10-15 years (as described below) and the time is right to consider a framework for sustainable urban transport. This paper concludes with the need and process for establishing a strategic vision for sustainable urban transport in San Pedro Sula, developed among all stakeholders: national, regional and local legislators, other policy makers, urban planners, traffic and public transport managers, transportation company owners, and the public.

San Pedro Sula is the second largest city in Honduras, with an estimated population of over 800,000 (see locator map below). San Pedro Sula is also capital of the department (state/province) of Cortes. It is an important transportation hub in Central America and is located 60 km south of Puerto Cortes, Honduras’ main seaport. Several major national and international highways cross in San Pedro Sula, including the Pan-American Highway.



One of San Pedro Sula's nicknames is *La Capital Industrial* with production facilities for coffee, bananas, tobacco, beef, sugar cane and forestry. Additionally, garment assembly facilities (maquiladoras) are also an important source of employment. San Pedro Sula is also home to seven major colleges and university including: the University of San Pedro Sula (private), the National Autonomous University of Honduras (Sula Valley), and others.

Growth in population (forecasts project a doubling of residents by 2036), employment, and the economy has created severe traffic problems in San Pedro Sula. Traffic congestion has several attendant problems beyond the impact on commerce (due to people and goods being delayed to their destinations). Other major issues include energy consumption (wasted fuel due to congestion) and environmental concerns, mainly air pollution caused by cars idling in traffic congestion. The importance of these issues is exemplified by the Hoy No Circular initiative attempted in April 2008 to reduce gasoline demand and national fuel subsidies. The worldwide recession has only postponed these issues on a temporary basis. A Sustainable Urban Transport Plan seeks to mitigate these problems by reducing the use of the automobile during peak periods on congested roads. The "breather" created by the recession affords San Pedro Sula a unique opportunity to craft a sustainable future. This process is already underway with the current crafting of a new Municipal Land Use Plan, which includes a transport component.

Current Situation

As noted above, San Pedro Sula is the industrial heart of Honduras. Up until the recent global recession, the Honduran economy was growing (4% annual growth in GDP) at a pace not seen since the 1970's. San Pedro Sula witnessed growth in employment and population as the national economy grew.

However, with this growth came several problems associated with mobility...too many cars and too many buses vying for the same street space as demand for transportation services grew

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with the economy. More Honduran families can afford an automobile and can use taxis, but more people are using the public transportation as well. Some of the issues created by this growth in cars and bus use are detailed below:

- **Traffic congestion** – in general, the growth in use of private automobiles, taxis, rapiditos and buses has created severe traffic congestion in and around San Pedro Sula. Peak period traffic delay has grown rapidly in just the past several years. As mentioned earlier, increased traffic congestion creates negative side impacts of more air pollution and wasted energy (primarily gasoline).
- **Bus operations** – buses, taxis and private automobile vie for the same limited road space (with bicycles and pedestrians as well). Growth in public transport franchises creates “bus congestion” in the center of San Pedro Sula.



- **Bus Safety** – violent crime can and does occur on buses in and around San Pedro Sula, making this mode of transport dangerous and less attractive as an alternative to using a car. It is clearly a mode more for people who are dependent on it for mobility rather than as a choice.
- **Regulatory Limitations** – while the national government grants operating franchises to bus companies to operating on predetermined bus routes (serving key origins and destinations), the Municipality of San Pedro Sula **only** has the power to regulate which streets are used for each bus route. This severely limits the ability of the municipality to manage traffic and public transport services.
- **Street Vendors and Road Safety** – vendors also encroach onto public road space, limiting space for vehicles and vehicle flow and creating dangerous interactions between vehicles and pedestrians and bicyclists.
- **Lack of funding** – finally, but perhaps most importantly, the municipality lacks funding to solve many of these problems. Rather, the overall strategy of the Urban Transport Technical Unit (UTTU) is to manage traffic and bus operations in the safest and most efficient way possible, given the circumstances. As is discussed in the next section,

UTTU has accomplished a tremendous amount in a short period of time with very limited resources.

- **Car Culture** – as with the rest of the industrializing world, Hondurans want to own and/or have use of their own automobile. Cars are a huge status symbol in the world and provide a sense of independence, mobility and prestige. But car use can create social exclusion as people live and commute in isolation of one another.

Some economists assert that congestion is a natural result of a healthy economy and should be tolerated. Others, however, contend that economic growth and transport growth can be “decoupled” – that the economy can grow without more cars if the public and policy-makers buy into a sustainable transport system. The European Commission’s Green Paper on Urban Mobility¹ defines Sustainable Urban Mobility as:

allowing people and goods to move freely and safely, while respecting the environment, for both our quality of life and for the health of the economy

In fact, sustainable urban transport may have less to do with mobility, and more to do with accessibility. We want to guarantee that citizens have access to good, services, education, entertainment, etc. This does not necessarily mean we need to guarantee that every citizen can travel when and how they want, no matter the environmental, social or economic impact.

These fundamental concepts of Sustainability, Mobility, and Accessibility are being debated around the world as people realize the finite resources we have and the often negative cumulative impacts of the automobile. Not that the car is evil; but that the car can ultimately be more harmful than good, in a broad societal sense, when concentrated on congested streets and the most congested times of day. The European Commission’s Green Paper on sustainable urban transport is entitled “Toward a New Culture for Urban Mobility” for it is a cultural movement as much as it is a technical or managerial process.

Current Traffic and Transport Programs and Projects in San Pedro Sula

The Urban Transport Technical Unit (UTTU) of the Municipality of San Pedro Sula was formed about 15 years ago, partially as a result of an Inter-American Development Bank (IDB) funding program that included institutional reform of transit and traffic in San Pedro Sula. In recent years, UTTU has accomplished a tremendous amount of traffic and public transit management via many innovative initiatives. Five initiatives are enumerated here.

- **Interurban Bus Terminal** – UTTU coordinated an initiative to relocate the interurban bus termini from the center to a consolidated bus terminal. In 2006, La Gran Central Metropolitana (the Grand Central Terminal) opened approximately 4 km south of the city center. The project used private funds to be paid back from tenant leases and other

¹ European Commission, *Towards a New Culture for Urban Mobility*, Green Paper Information Leaflet, 2007 Full green paper at: <http://eur-lex.europa.eu/LexUriServ/LexUriServ.do?uri=COM:2007:0551:FIN:ES:PDF>

revenue. The municipality had no power to force the interurban bus companies to move to the grand terminal, but ultimately convinced most of the companies to move in order to upgrade their facilities, provide operational efficiencies, and give patrons a clean, safe station. Security within the terminal, provided used closed circuit TV, is a vital part of the success of the new facility. Passengers traveling onto the city center can use taxis or rapiditos that board in front of the terminal.

- **Center City Bus Zone** – In order to improve the flow of buses, cars and taxi in the center of San Pedro Sula, UTTU designated a bus zone within the city core and carefully assigned street that each bus route must use. This assignment of streets sought to keep buses out of the commercial core and avoiding turning conflicts between cars and buses. This is accomplished by carefully routing buses from the east, west and north onto certain streets. The municipality's main enforcement activity, therefore, is to assure buses on a give route use the designated streets. Safety and security on the buses themselves are under the jurisdiction of the national transit police.
- **Street Vendor Management** – another key initiative to improve safety and efficient of downtown streets was to move street vendors off of many of the sidewalks and streets within the city center to designated areas. These areas offer less bus/car and pedestrian interactions, thus improving overall safety of the transport system. Again, this initiative was less a matter of the city focusing vendors off streets and sidewalks and more a collaborative effort between the city and street vendor associations.
- **Municipal Road Regulations** – another important tool in managing traffic are rules regulating the Use of Public Roads adopted by the municipality to regulating and monitoring services that carry passengers and cargo and all vehicles that use roads within the city of San Pedro Sula. This allows the city to manage the type and size of vehicle using certain downtown streets.
- **One-way Couplets** – UTTU has also been working to increase the number of streets that operate and one-way couplets in the city, especially in areas adjacent to the city center. This system increases the effective capacity of the street system to efficiently move more cars and buses.

Planned Initiatives

As of July 2009, UTTU had four initiatives underway or planned, one to manage on-street parking, another to create a downtown bus center, a conceptual design of a BRT system, and a consolidated wholesale market.

- **On-street Parking Management** – San Pedro Sula was considering on-street parking meters to raise revenue and manage traffic in the congested core. The issue being discussed at the time was the ability to provide parking validation for shoppers so as to not negatively impact downtown merchants.
- **Intraurban Bus Center and Vendor** - The Interurban bus terminal on the edge of the city center was successful at reducing traffic congestion caused from the myriad of independent bus terminals and stops operated by interurban carriers. The management of street vendors off bus streets also helped this situation. However, to further reduce downtown congestion and vehicle/pedestrian conflicts, UTTU has plans to build a bus center on a whole city block. Bus stalls would be provided around the outside of the block with vendor stalls on the interior. Such a downtown bus center would better manage traffic, allow for coordinated transfers and provide patrons with conveniences offered by street vendors. UTTU has been undertaking a site selection process and investigating private funding opportunities.
- **Bus Rapid Transit System** – UTTU has developed a conceptual plan for bus rapid transport (BRT) that would offer a system to generate orderly traffic in the city center as a new mass transit system. UTTU aims to improve public transport in the city by replacing the current conventional transport system with BRT.
- **Consolidated Wholesale Market** – UTTU has created a centralized market for wholesalers of perishable goods like fruits and vegetables in the southeast sector of the city. This allows for the management of freight traffic by discouraging large trucks from the city center. This not only reduces congestion, but also wear and tear on the road system. It will also contribute to the development of the city. The market is currently operating in a temporary location while the permanent terminal is being constructed. As with the Grand Bus Terminal, private funds are being used.

As of the writing of this paper (May 2010), a new planning initiative is underway to create an updated land use plan for San Pedro Sula. The newly elected mayor extended the existing five year plan and created a special council commission to formulate a new land use plan with a 20-year time horizon. The commission has until the end of 2010 to update the “Municipal Plan for Land Use – San Pedro Sula (Plan Municipal de Ordenamiento Territorial de San Pedro Sula, PMOT-SPS).”² The new PMOT-SPS plan will include two components directly related to transport: infrastructure and utilities as well as planning, transport and highways. The process guiding the development of the new plan will be grounded in the principles of sustainability, economic, environmental and social. The process calls for a strategic vision for the growth of San Pedro Sula. This visioning exercise is in keeping with guidance from the World Bank and

² City of San Pedro Sula, “Project Formulation: Municipal Plan for Land Use of San Pedro Sula – PMOT-SPS,” March 2010.

other international best practices on creating a sustainable urban transport plan.³ The PMOT-SPS is correctly linking transport issues to land use and quality of life issues.

National Initiatives

Most transportation policy is made at the national level, in terms of public transport franchising and safety, taxation and subsidies, environmental policy, and road construction, maintenance, and management. In terms of transportation revenue sources, some highways are tolled, especially those serving international port facilities, but most roads are not tolled. Also, unlike the U.S., Honduras does not raise revenue via fuel taxes. In fact, the national government has been subsidizing fuel prices to support economic growth.

Two national initiatives impact San Pedro Sula, one still underway and one that was very short lived.

- **Dry Canal Truck Highway** – National and international funding is being used to build several “dry” canals linking Pacific and Atlantic ports. In Honduras, the dry canal, or inter-ocean highway, is being built between Puerto Cortés on the Caribbean and La Unión in El Salvador and Henecán in Honduras on the Pacific. A section of the dry canal will travel just east of San Pedro Sula and may keep heavy-duty vehicles off local and regional roads and provide better access between Honduras’ main cities.
- **No Drive Days (Hoy no Circula)** – In April 2008, the President Zelaya imposed no drive days in San Pedro Sula to reduce fuel consumption (subsidized by the national government). The program lasted only three days, with widespread public opposition, and was overturned by the Honduran Supreme Court as unconstitutional because it restricted movement, a right guaranteed to Hondurans. The initiative was introduced again to the legislature in October and the President even mentioned the need for Hoy no Circula in early June 2009 if the price of gasoline continues to increase. One issue with No Drive Days was the lack of good alternatives to driving, given capacity and safety concerns with public transit and no safe bicycle routes.

This section paints a picture of both great need (to address traffic congestion, safety, energy and mobility concerns) and great initiative (on the part of administrators and policy-makers to solve the problems with minimal public resources). UTTU has made tremendous progress in a relatively short period of time to manage traffic and public transport with limited funds and almost no regulatory power to influence the vehicles that use the streets of San Pedro Sula. Given the commitment of UTTU to address traffic congestion and to make the city a better, safer, cleaner and robust place to live and work, the rest of this green paper provides some recommendations for developing a sustainable urban transportation plan for San Pedro Sula.

MANAGING TRAVEL AND IMPROVING MOBILITY

³ World Bank, “Strategic Planning for Sustainable Metropolitan Transport and Alternatives Analysis,” presentation by Sam Zimmerman for Public-Private Infrastructure Advisory Facility, 2009.

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Framework for Sustainable Urban Transport – A New Vision

Several key questions should be answered before recommendations are offered. What is sustainable urban transport and why should San Pedro Sula want to develop a sustainable urban transport plan (SUTP)?

- **The Big Picture – Why sustainable transport?** - While urban transportation systems allow us to get around, access jobs, services and goods, and maintain a certain feeling of independence through mobility, urban transport systems can also have negative impacts. Urban transport can be expensive, unsafe, polluting, and consume land better used for other things. The sustainable transport “philosophy” is aimed at reducing the negative, long-term impacts of transportation in our cities. The European Union (Council of Ministers of Transport) defines a sustainable transportation system as one that:
 - ✓ Allows the basic access and development needs of individuals, companies and society to be met safely and in a manner consistent with human and ecosystem health, and promotes equity within and between successive generations.
 - ✓ Is affordable, operates fairly and efficiently, offers a choice of transport mode, and supports a competitive economy, as well as balanced regional development.
 - ✓ Limits emissions and waste within the planet’s ability to absorb them, uses renewable resources at or below their rates of generation, and uses non-renewable resources at or below the rates of development of renewable substitutes, while minimizing the impact on the use of land and the generation of noise.

Generally, sustainable urban transport focuses on reducing the predominance of the car, focuses on making public transport better, safer, and cheaper, and expands mobility options to include shared rides (carpooling), bicycling and walking as acceptable and utilized modes of travel. Sustainable transport is all about improved travel choices, not restrictions on the automobile, per se.

- **Can SUTP be integrated into infrastructure and operations?** – adopting a sustainable urban transport plan does not preclude continued expansion of infrastructure (roads, terminals, etc.) nor the efficient operation of that infrastructure. It does, however, break the cycle of “predict and provide” meaning that the demand for transport use is not taken as a given and the transport supply built to accommodate it; rather the demand for travel within the city is viewed in a different light. Citizens and visitors are given maximum choices in how (car, bus or bike), when (outside peak congested period), where (which route they take) and even whether they travel (work or learn from home).
- **Doesn’t a Growing Economy Mean More Cars?** – in the past, economic growth has progressed lock-step with growth in the transport sector. This generally meant more cars, more trucks, more roads....more congestion, air pollution, and accidents. In developing countries, with underdeveloped transport systems, citizens have more limited access to economic opportunities and the presumed solution is more access by car.

But new thinking has challenged this assumption, asserting that economic growth can occur without commensurate growth in car use. International studies have concluded that transport growth can be “uncoupled” from economic growth.⁴ Two ways of doing so include reducing the overall demand for travel in order to increase quality of life and providing modal choices to travelers that do not involve driving alone in a car. Several cities in Europe have continued to experienced significant economic growth while taking steps to reduce car use (London’s Congestion Charge being a prime example).

- **Why Sustainable Urban Transport in Honduras** – Honduras, as well as many other developing countries, face a crucial choice with regards to transportation, mobility and accessibility. On the one hand, Honduras and San Pedro Sula can plan a future that seeks to build enough transport infrastructure to meet growing demand for car use, interurban travel and freight movement. However, this comes at a great cost. Most transport funding goes into basic infrastructure, the national highway network. Some might consider national fuel subsidies as transportation funding as well. Expansion of urban networks to address congestion is a lower priority. Even if funding was available for expanding the road system, roads have several negative impacts, in terms of taking land that might better be used for housing, agriculture or open space, creating environmental impacts and noise, and finally, in separating communities with physical divisions. Industrialized nations have come to realize that they cannot “build their way out” of congestion.

Alternatively, San Pedro Sula can create a future for itself that does not place the car in the center of its plan. Just the opposite, a sustainable transport future can be created that offer choices to people. Choices in how they travel (e.g., car vs. bus), when they travel (avoiding peak periods), the route they take, and even if they need to travel (working from home or distance learning).

Providing more and better choices does much more than just address congestion, which is clearly the day-to-day issue for most. Providing choices creates opportunities that can improve the lives of all residents. Current bus riders get better, safer, cleaner service. People who would not use the bus are willing to try it again. The car is not the only way “off the bus.” Car owners get less congested roads and can provide rides in their empty seats to co-workers or fellow students. In short, choices are created between being “forced” to take the bus and “dreaming” of having a car for a large proportion of residents.

Clearly, this alternative vision takes a shift in the mindset of residents – “a new culture” among politicians, planners, transportation owners, and traffic managers. But this mind shift is possible and has begun in earnest in cities such as Guatemala City, Bogotá, and Mexico City – cities that have a vision and a plan. The Guatemala 2020 Plan is a plan “for a Livable City.”

⁴ Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development, *Road Travel Demand: Meeting the Challenge*, 2002. 12th WCTR, July 11-15, 2010 – Lisbon Portugal

- **What is a Sustainable Urban Transport Plan?** – The Spanish Institute for Energy Diversification and Savings produces a very useful guidance document titled: A Practical Guide to Sustainable Urban Transport Planning.⁵ That guide defines SUTP as:

A Sustainable Urban Mobility Plan (same as SUTP) is a set of activities with the objective of establishing more sustainable forms of travel (walking, bicycling, and public transport) within a city; that is to say, by means of compatible transport that support economic growth, social cohesion and environmental protection and guarantee, in this form, better quality of life for its citizens.

Sustainable urban transport plans are meant to be developed as part of an open dialog as to the future mobility and accessibility policies of the city among residents, businesses, transport providers, planners, and elected officials. The most successful SUTPs have been developed with equal input from citizens, politicians and technicians.

The IDAE Practical Guidance also defines the principle characteristics of a SUTP:

Principle characteristics of a SUTP are:

- Apply at the local and/or metropolitan level;
- Guarantee to meet accessibility and mobility needs of citizens;
- Include of all modes of transport, both personal and goods;
- Are consistent with other local, regional, national strategies to support sustainability;
- Reduce the negative impacts of transport;
- Attempt to reduce growth in traffic volumes and attendant traffic congestion;
- Shift modal distribution in favor of cleaner and more efficient modes;
- Work within the planning process to balance accessibility and mobility needs of various activity centers throughout city.

The benefits of implementing a successful SUTP are also conveyed in the IDAE guidance:

Reduction of traffic jams and the effects derived from congestion: noise, air pollution, contribution to the greenhouses, and accidents.

Reduction of nonrenewable energy consumption, by promoting renewable fuel consumption, such as cleaner biofuels and other alternative fuels.

Reduction in travel times.

Improvement in public transport services.

⁵ “PMUS: Guía práctica para la elaboración e implantación de planes de movilidad urbana sostenible
http://www.idae.es/index.php/mod.documentos/mem.descarga?file=/documentos_10251_Guia_PMUS_06_6c6fc808.pdf

Recovery of public spaces (from roads and parking) for better uses to improve quality of life.

Improved accessibility for all inhabitants, including people with reduced mobility.

Improved health for all citizens, thanks to reductions in air pollution, water contamination, and noise and also better health due to the promotion of bicycling and walking.

Improvement in the quality of the urban environment and the quality of life of inhabitants.

The guidance concludes by stating that SUTP's work to integrate all the benefits of sustainable transport into a rationale approach.

Is International Support Available?

While international funding (e.g., IADB or BCIE) for development and implementation of a SUTP could be pursued, technical support is available in the form of case studies, guidance materials, and support networks.

One international aid organization presented the challenge as:

Most ... cities urgently need to establish a strategic development framework that will link urban transport, effective environmental management, and inclusive social development and poverty reduction. The framework will require building strong institutional capacities to improve traffic regulations and their enforcement; introduce integrated planning and programming; and promote sustainable transport schemes based on affordable environmentally-friendly, motorized and non-motorized transport.⁶

IDAE – The Institute for Energy Diversification and Saving is the leading Spanish national source of technical assistance in sustain urban transport. The Spanish IDAE website has guidance on SUTP, including the Practical Guidance report cited above. IDAE can be accessed at www.idae.es. More information on mobility and transport can be found at:

<http://www.idae.es/index.php/mod.pags/mem.detalle/relcategoria.1029/id.223/reldata.52>

Guidance documents are available on: SUTPs, workplace mobility plans and public bicycle programs in Spain.

Two international support programs, with a significance focus on Central America are:

⁶ Asian Development Bank, Sustainable Urban Transport, Project No. 39355, October 2006.
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NESTLAC – the Network for Environmentally Sustainable Transport in Latin and Central America aims to disseminate, promote and facilitate the implementation of environmentally sustainable transport options in Latin America and the Caribbean. The network promotes a switch from private cars to public transport and non-motorized modes (bicycling and walking). It is operated by the Risoe Center on Energy, Environment, and Sustainable Development at the Technical University of Denmark and is partially funded by the United Nation Environmental Program. Membership in the Network includes transportation, public transit and environmental agencies in Guatemala, El Salvador, and Panama. (www.nestlac.org)

NESTLAC hosted the director and advisor from UTTU to a two-day workshop on planning and implementation of Bus Rapid Transit, held in Guatemala City in May, 2008.

EMBRAQ – the Center for Sustainable Transport of the World Resources Institute “works with cities in developing world to catalyze and help implement sustainable solutions to the problems of urban mobility.” EMBRAQ is located in Washington D.C. and supports offices in Mexico and Brazil (as well as India and Turkey). Recent work includes bus rapid transit in Mexico City and Guadalajara. (www.embarq.org)

POTENTIAL STRATEGIES

The primary objective of this paper is to support a dialog in and about San Pedro Sula as to the need for and benefits of a Sustainable Urban Transport Plan. This document is meant to provide a glimpse at a vision for San Pedro Sula that is **not** clogged with cars, choking on pollution, unsafe to travel within, and very expensive to maintain, in terms of land, fuel and public monies.

The Sustainable Urban Transport Planning process, discussed in the last section (based on available guidance from the Spanish IDAE), will provide direction on the specific strategies that could be adopted in San Pedro Sula. However, based on a very cursory assessment of potential solutions, most of which have already been identified by UTTU, a SUTP for San Pedro Sula might include one or more of the following new initiatives:

- 1. Transit regulatory restructuring** – a very critical barrier to the efficient and effective management of traffic in San Pedro Sula is the lack of regulatory control over public transport. As mentioned earlier, public transit franchises, safety, administration and taxation are controlled by national agencies and influenced by the political system. Local control over public transport could result in improved efficiencies, safer service, and coordination of inter- and intra-urban services. Local control could also provide municipal administrator with better tools to manage the confluence of cars, taxis and buses on streets and roads, and, in so doing, better tackle congestion. Of course, local control of public transport would also require a review of financing options to create the needed infrastructure of more efficient public transport.
- 2. Shuttle system from Gran Terminal to the city center** – UTTU has plans for a downtown bus center (as mentioned earlier). To most efficiently and safely move patrons from the Gran Terminal to the city center, a high-capacity, high speed shuttle system could be implemented. The shuttle system could use the abandoned rail right-of-way that passes near the Gran Terminal and the original train station in the center city. Such a shuttle could use conventional buses, mini-buses (Rapiditos) or special vehicles operated as Bus Rapid Transit. Such a shuttle system would reduce the number of vehicles on other streets and focus downtown transit activity in planned, coordinated locations, such as the planned transit center.
- 3. Road and bus safety campaign** – traveling in San Pedro Sula can, unfortunately, be a dangerous endeavor. Conflicts between pedestrians and buses, taxis and cars are frequent (albeit better since street management initiatives undertaken by UTTU). Public transport service has also been plagued with violent crime associated with robbery and the drug trade. While security on and around buses can be improved, perhaps another way to address this issue is via a public education campaign. Such a campaign, hopefully with private support, could educate residents about taking care when on or around buses. It can also teach drivers how to be mindful of pedestrians and bicycle riders.
- 4. Employer commute management program** - San Pedro Sula is the industrial engine of Honduras and is home to many large employers and to many institutions of higher

education. These employment and education centers are significant generators of traffic. Administrators of these locations can seek to manage traffic coming and going from their facilities by adopting certain policies to encourage employees and students to make good choices about how they travel. This might include staggering work or class schedules so that traffic is spread over a longer period of time at or near adjacent locations. It might include offering those employees who carpool special parking spaces closest to building entrances. Employers might also subsidize safety, higher quality bus service. Working with large employers and campuses, UTTU could coordinate and manage commuting issues in a more efficient and effective manner. Workplace and school “travel plans” have become commonplace in the U.S. and the U.K. Special guidance is also available from IDEA (see web-link above).

5. **Urban Bikeway System** – one of these most environmentally-friendly, lowest cost and healthiest ways to travel is by bicycle. While San Pedro Sula is surrounded by mountains, the valley is relatively flat. A system of bicycle paths and information signs could create a very attractive choice for students, commuters, and others. However, safe bike routes and safe bike parking is needed to make the system work. One way of introducing residents to the benefits of bicycling is through “Ciclovia” projects that involve the closer of streets for exclusive use by bicyclists and walkers on weekend or holiday. Such programs are becoming very popular in places like Guatemala City, Mexico City, New York City, and Bogotá (credited with inventing the idea).

Again, these suggested strategies are not meant to pre-empt a thoughtful, open planning process to create a SUTP for San Pedro Sula. Rather they are intended to illustrate the range of new and enhanced travel options for residents. Other examples from Central and Latin America were provided in the presentation made in San Pedro Sula in March 2008. Recommendations on undertaking a Sustainable Urban Transport planning process in San Pedro Sula are included in the next section.

RECOMMENDATIONS

So, what would it take to develop a Sustainable Urban Transport Plan for San Pedro Sula? Anything that suggests a change in prevailing cultural norms must seem daunting. But every new initiative requires two basic things: a champion and the willingness to start. UTTU can be the champion for a sustainable future in San Pedro Sula. Here are some steps that might be undertaken to develop a SUTP:

Recommendations

1. **Continue Good Work!!!** The first step is to realize that great strides have already been undertaken to manage traffic and transit in San Pedro Sula. Recently, municipal leaders in El Progreso decided to create a UTTU unit of their own in recognition of the success of the unit in San Pedro Sula.

2. **Take Ownership of Sustainable Urban Transport Framework** – staff at UTTU or its designee should make this SUT framework document their own. An overall vision, goals and objectives should be added to tailor the framework to San Pedro Sula’s current situation and overall policy priorities for the city. The PMOT-SPS process is a very good forum for achieving this consensus-building and buy-in.
3. **Select Strategies for SUTP** – prepare draft strategies for inclusion in Sustainable Urban Transport Plan or the transport areas of the PMOT-SPS, to include short- and long-term measures to increase mobility choices for residents, workers and visitors. Consult guidance, such as the IDAE guidance report, and internal and external (international) technical resources to evaluate potential strategies.
4. **Discuss Strategies** – undertake a consultation process to discuss the proposed strategies, goals and objectives for sustainable transport, leading toward a general consensus on a vision for the future. Discussion should take place among politicians, administrators, transportation company owners, commuters and residents alike. The visioning exercise that is an integral part of the PMOT-SPS plan development process could serve this purpose. The outcome should be a fairly complete SUTP. The final SUTP can then be formally presented to national policy-makers and administrators at SOPTRAVI.
5. **“Shop” SUTP to International Funders (NGOs)** - once the SUTP is drafted and supported by stakeholders in San Pedro Sula, the plan can be presented to international aid organizations that might be willing to support SUTP initiatives to address environmental, energy or poverty issues. Having such a plan will demonstrate San Pedro Sula’s commitment to sustainability and readiness to adopt proactive strategies to assure a sustainable future.
6. **Lobby for More Local Regulatory Control** – a key barrier to overcome will be the need to assume local control for public transport regulation in order to manage traffic and provide more local administration of safety and reliability. Some Latin American cities have implemented their own publicly-operated systems, namely bus rapid transit, to assume better control of safety and service reliability at an affordable price. This lobbying effort may require a legislative proposal to change national law to transfer regulatory control over public transport services to the municipal level.
7. **Identify local resource strategy** – with or without international, or even national funding, the SUTP will need a solid financing element, consisting of public resources, private funds, concessions, and other user fees.
8. **Implement short-term strategies** – it will be important to implement some short-term initiatives to create early successes that will show residents (voters) that a vision for a sustainable future begins with expanded travel choices. Something like a bikeway master plan and implementation of initial routes would be a good example.
9. **Evaluate fulfillment of objectives** – careful monitoring and evaluation of early initiatives will allow for adjustments to the SUTP to assure that the plan is meeting local objectives and that users of the new travel choices are satisfied with their mobility.

10. **Initiate Long-term Strategies** – the long-term success of the SUTP will be determined by the ability of UTTU to institutionalize sustainable transportation as “the way of doing business” when it comes to urban transport. In order to institutionalize sustainable urban transport, choices need to be built into land use decisions, the location and financing of infrastructure, and other urban policies.

CONCLUSIONS

Is a Sustainable Urban Transport Plan right for San Pedro Sula? The plan is the easy part....a shared vision for a sustainable future is the harder task. But, the ability to increase travel choices and increase opportunities for all residents and commuters is a vision that seems to be more attractive to clogged streets, unsafe buses, dirty air, high energy prices, and wasted time in bump-to-bumper traffic.

Local elected officials may be reluctant to support a change in popular thinking to a future with less emphasis on the car. However, in cities where SUTP has become the norm, politicians who support this vision can and are getting re-elected. The Mayor of London was re-elected after imposing congestion fees because residents and commuters saw the dramatic improvements in traffic and mobility.

This vision can start with a serious dialog among administrators and policy-makers at the municipality, lead by UTTU, and supported by an international movement that seeks to create a better way to get where we need to go. The process now underway to create a new land use plan, the Municipal Plan for Land Use in San Pedro Sula, is a big step in the right direction toward a sustainable transport future.