Pioneering a small-town transport system

It’s been several years in the making, but it seems like the growing town of George in the Southern Cape is set to have its own brand of integrated public transport soon.

Before the high-profile public transport projects in Johannesburg and Cape Town grabbed the headlines, the provincial government of the Western Cape was consulting the people of George about a new era in public transport.

This semi-rural town has been expanding rapidly in recent years — and is set to continue doing so — with new middle-income and luxury developments centred on the tourism and golfing sectors, and an in-migration of people mainly from the Eastern Cape.

As the town positions itself at the heart of a new urban hub, the lack of a proper public transport system was seen as an impediment to continued economic growth. Apartheid-era spatial planning is still evident, with Pacaltsdorp and Thembalethu essentially separate areas, divided from each other and from the largely white town of George. Most public services are provided in the town itself, which also houses a sizeable industrial area.

In 2004, the province, with its local government partners — Eden District Municipality and the George Municipality — developed the George Mobility Strategy. This plan dealt with all aspects of mobility, from walking and cycling to upgrading roads, and proposed an innovative approach to public transport.

In George, there is a limited bus service, with the bulk of public transport being provided by minibus taxis — many of which are operated without legal permits. Linkages with surrounding towns — Mossel Bay, Wilderness and Oudtshoorn — are poor, and people living in rural settlements and on farms have little option when it comes to transport.

More people in George walk to work or school (an average of 2.4 km) because they can’t afford taxi fare or services aren’t available, according to a survey. Despite the minibus taxi services in Thembalethu, 65% of commuters walk.

Involving the people

These are some of the processes that have been undertaken to involve the people of George in the development of a new public transport system for the area:

- A travel demand survey was undertaken to gauge the need for and likely demand for an improved public transport service. This study also looked at socio-economic issues, such as levels of household income, affordability and lack of access to opportunity.
- A series of focus groups was held with people from all of the municipality’s wards to discuss experience of and attitudes towards the current public transport offering and what benefits a new system might hold.
- A series of open days was held at which the features of the new system were outlined in an exhibition format with officials on hand to explain how it would work and capture public input.
- Members of the project team undertook a tour of the proposed routes and stops with local councillors, members of ward committees and other interested parties to ensure that the plans met public needs and concerns at a local level.
- There is also a George Mobility Project information Office in the centre of the town, which has route maps and pamphlets in English, Xhosa and Afrikaans. This office is open for anyone to walk in and find out more about the new system.
- There have also been ongoing discussions with operators of both buses and minibus taxis, and a Memorandum of Understanding has been signed by both the operators and the province.
The proposed public transport system would involve the province introducing a scheduled transport system that would be operated in terms of a tender negotiated with the current bus and minibus taxi operators, who would be shareholders in a new commercial entity. The fares would be collected by a separate company, and the operator would be compensated on the basis of how many kilometres have been travelled rather than how many passengers have been carried. There would also be independent monitoring of the standards of the service. The province is expected to plough R20 million a year in subsidies into the new service.

The new system should cater for the needs of special groups, such as people with disabilities, the elderly, women with prams and children. The plan is to launch the system using existing vehicles on the routes as an interim measure, until new vehicles can be procured.

Discussions with the operators are making progress. The province has assured the industry that no jobs will be lost and that there will be business development support and educational and training opportunities for those currently involved in the transport industry — vehicle owners, drivers, guards, rank officials and those who clean and maintain the vehicles.

Other benefits include employment security, fair labour practices, minimum wages and all the benefits of working for a formal company, including medical aid, pension and leave.

While discussions continue with operators, the wider public of George has been kept informed of what the new system would offer and there has been widespread support for it.

The town’s role as a team host city for the 2010 World Cup has given added impetus to getting the service running sooner rather than later.

If this far-reaching project works, it will set an example for smaller towns in the rest of the country, as well as vastly improve the quality of life for residents and open up new markets and economic opportunities.