

PRESS REPORTS

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An unhealthy obsession with new roads!

OUR STATE'S appetite for road-building is insatiable. Ever since independence, the main infrastructural investment undertaken by successive governments has been road-building. We had a four-lane highway linking the easternmost part of the island to the westernmost, years before the first, modern General Hospital was opened, which says something about the policy-makers' priorities.

Most of the annual development budget went on roads, as if the government of the day felt duty-bound to provide the big contracting companies with lucrative road-building contracts, regardless of what the economy's needs were. Despite the acute water shortages every year, governments never showed a similar enthusiasm for setting up an adequate number of desalination plants.

The Clerides government's plans for a third desalination plant were shelved by the current government, which has finally realised its mistake and is in a big rush to set up a mobile plant because the dams have dried up. When it came to the previous government's plans for a costly Paphos-Polis highway, featuring several tunnels, the issue of shelving it did not arise, despite the World Bank's view that it was not cost-effective. Common sense dictated that the setting up of a desalination plant should have been given priority over a new road that would serve a tiny fraction of the population, but for the government there was no dilemma.

This road-building mania persists, even now that we have a more than satisfactory road network. On Tuesday, Lania councillors called a press conference to voice their opposition to government plans to build a four-lane highway by their village. Does the region genuinely need a highway, when it is served by a perfectly good two-lane road that is only busy a few days each year? An assessment carried out by the Lania Masterplan found that the existing road network served the area's needs. So why is the government so eager to waste the taxpayer's money on yet another fancy four-lane highway that serves no real purpose?

Explanations would have to be given from now on, because, according to EU rules incorporated in Cyprus law, there have to be public consultations before big projects are undertaken. As Lania Councillors pointed out on Tuesday, the Law on Freedom of Access to Environmental Information provides that there should be a public hearing explaining the impact of a new project. No such hearing took place regarding the new highway, policy-makers working on the assumption that the building of a new road would always be welcome.

This assumption is no longer valid, as the case of Lania has shown, and policy-makers would do well to reconsider their road-building obsession, at long last. We do not have to ruin our countryside with four-lane highways that nobody, apart from Nicosia bureaucrats, seems to want.