**NEWS ARTICLE**

South Africa cannot afford commuter rail to fail

**08 April 2024:** Commuter rail is a key aspect of any strategic public transport network. “We cannot afford for commuter rail in South Africa to fail,” says **James Anafi**, Market Sector Lead: Rail, Africa at [AECOM](http://www.aecom.com).

He reveals that statistics from the 2019 National House Hold Travel Survey (NHHTS) for Gauteng, the country’s largest economic hub, revealed a huge decline in the commuter rail market share compared to 2014, as indicated in the table below:

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Mode** | **2014 Work Trips** | **2014 Percentage** | **2019 Work Trips** | **2019 Percentage** |
| Rail | 339 000 | 17.1% | 80 000 | 4.1% |
| Bus | 236 000 | 11.9% | 153 000 | 7.9% |
| Minibus Taxi | 1 402 000 | 70.9% | 1 700 000 | 87.9% |
| Total | 1 977 000 | 100.0% | 1 933 000 | 100.0% |

Even before 2014, the commuter rail modal share had already declined from previous years due to a drop in service quality and related aspects, such as reliability, punctuality and passenger security. The COVID-19 pandemic further severely impacted commuter rail services after 2020 to the point of them almost being non-operational.

Commuter rail generally is a very efficient mode to transport passengers in dense and high-volume commuting corridors. Due to its efficiency, commuter rail in most instances is also more affordable to both government and passengers, despite it being reliant on subsidies.

Consecutive travel surveys also indicate that larger and larger portions of household disposable income is being spent on transport, with transport affordability declining and many commuters even being forced to walk unacceptably long distances to work, due to them not being able to afford any motorised transport modes.

If well managed and operated, commuter rail can be reliable and travel times quite predictable, as rail has its own right of way and is unaffected by congestion, as is the case with road-based public transport modes. Given the major contribution that transportation makes to greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions, the promotion of commuter rail as a more sustainable mode is important.

Globally trusted infrastructure consulting firm AECOM has significant experience and expertise in the rail sector in Africa. Globally, it is currently ranked #1 in terms of transit rail, with major projects such as Neom in Saudi Arabia and the California High-Speed Rail programme in the US.

AECOM has also worked on the feasibility of the Ethiopia-Sudan Railway, a proposed 1 522km standard gauge railway that will connect Addis Ababa in Ethiopia to Port Sudan on the Sudan Red Sea coast. AECOM became involved after the sponsors, African Development Bank and the Ethiopian government, approved funding for the feasibility study, which was completed in December 2022.

“We have done quite a bit of work around sustainable transport. The revitalisation and role of rail is quite a prevalent issue in South Africa at the moment,” says **Chris Britz**, Director: Transportation and Leader of the Transportation Business Line in Africa at AECOM. Here there are two aspects, namely commuter rail and its diminishing role, and freight rail and its impact on economic growth.

“The planning and strategic notion that a rail network needs to form the backbone of your public transport system is commendable, but currently this is definitely not the case in South Africa,” adds Britz.

Anafi points out that South African cities are still growing quite rapidly. Between 2011 and 2025, Johannesburg and Cape Town are expected to grow by over 20%. To transport all these people within an urban context in a sustainable manner requires a high capacity, high efficiency transportation mode, namely a strong, capable commuter rail system.

Omitting commuter rail from the transport equation results in an unbalanced sector, says **William Makwela**, a railway designer at AECOM. It has resulted in the predominance of the minibus taxi industry, which transports 80% of public transport passengers in the country at present. Its lack of regulation has seen a range of social issues, whereas if it had been allowed to develop in conjunction with commuter rail, would have been much more integrated and controlled than it is now.

“Transport is part of our everyday lives, but not a lot of people are really aware of the significance of it, especially rail.” Commuter rail ticks all the boxes in terms of the environment, society and the economy in many First World countries. “For South Africa to achieve a similar level, we must place more emphasis on our commuter rail system,” says **Salita Wudraj**, a railway designer at AECOM.

Government is committed to make commuter rail the backbone of urban public transport in South Africa and to improve efficiency and sustainability. In light of the 2021 National White Paper on Transport Policy and the National Rail Policy, rail is envisioned as an affordable, competitive, integrated, reliable, safe and sustainable transport mode that, by 2050, will be the backbone of South Africa’s freight logistics and passenger mobility systems.

“Whether or not government’s goal of 2050 is feasible depends on what is required to get there,” cautions Britz. National rail policy aims to transform passenger rail through new investments in infrastructure and separating infrastructure ownership and operations. The National Department of Transport (NDoT) is currently preparing a National Rail Plan to guid new investment in rail.

The White Paper calls for the commuter rail function to be devolved to either provinces or transport authorities at a provincial level in Gauteng’s case or at a local level in Cape Town. Britz points to commuter rail’s dominance in the past, compared to the 5% of the public transport market share held by the Passenger Rail Agency of South Africa (PRASA), as an indication of its true potential.

NDoT is also currently compiling a National Devolution Strategy to guide devolution of rail functions, which should be completed by mid-2024. PRASA is currently busy with a rebuild-and-recovery programme of its existing commuter lines, restoring services in addition to its ongoing train replacement programme for 600 new EMUs.

AECOM remains highly supportive of the development of an efficient commuter rail system in South Africa, especially the mooted expansion of the Gautrain network. “It also aligns well with our Environmental, Social and Governance (ESG) strategy called [Sustainable Legacies](https://publications.aecom.com/sustainable-legacies/),” says Anafi.

This strategy ensures AECOM embeds ESG principles into everything it does, from the way it runs its business to the work it carries out in partnership with its clients. It includes limiting the company’s carbon footprint and that of its projects. The development and active use of a low-emission transport mode like commuter rail goes a long way to reduce transportation’s carbon footprint,” says Anafi.

He calls for a renewed focus on expanding and improving commuter rail and thereby enhance the quality of life for all. “More efficient and reliable transportation cuts across all sectors. If you have a better transportation system, everybody in South Africa benefits.”

“We have had huge investments in rail infrastructure and services over the years. The low-hanging fruit is to revitalise and reinstate and improve on what one has. It will then give us a basis for a properly integrated and functional public transport system in future,” says Britz.

Anafi adds that private participation needs to be encouraged to revitalise commuter rail, as government alone cannot come up with all the necessary funding and necessary expertise. “Any restoration programme must focus on high demand corridors to provide a good, reliable and competitive service that then begins to bring high impact and confidence into the sector, so that people start seeing it as a viable option to use.”

An added benefit is the socioeconomic and local community development benefits associated with commuter rail expansion and operation. “A major problem is vandalism and theft. If we uplift communities as part of the commuter rail network, they will have a sense of ownership of this vital infrastructure and the need to preserve it for future generations,” says Anafi.

Britz adds that the institutional model around passenger rail service provision must be addressed. “A proper concessionary structure is necessary to oversee quality and efficiency. Therefore, we need to look at the institutional arrangements in place in terms of roles and responsibilities. That is a fundamental basis for more effective and efficient provision of commuter rail services,” he concludes.

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**Notes to the editor**

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