



ADDRESS BY

CAMILLE ROBINSON-REGIS, MP

Minister of Planning and Development
Ministry of Planning and Development
Town and Country Planning Division

Transformational Projects Launch

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SALUTATIONS

- The Hon Paula Gopee-Scoon, Minister of Trade and Industry
- Ms. Joanne Deoraj, Permanent Secretary of the Ministry of Planning and Development
- Dr. Ancil Kirk, Director Town and Country Planning Division
- Other members of the TCPD and Ministry of Planning and Development
- Representatives of the Ministry of Trade and Industry
- Representatives of Crimson Logic
- Specially invited guests
- Members of the Media
- Ladies and gentlemen

Today is indeed a red letter day for us in these two pivotal Ministries in the Government of Trinidad and Tobago. Moreso, it marks a quantum leap forward for the business community that has long clamoured for the initiatives being launched today, as the projected outcomes will impact significantly on both the cost and the ease of doing business in Trinidad and Tobago.

Automation of the construction permitting process, automation of TCPD's much maligned Building Approval process, digitization of all submissions, plans and approvals and the ability of the public to locate all in one space, will undoubtedly place Trinidad and Tobago in a far better space than it currently occupies on the World Bank's Ease of Doing Business Index.

The unvarnished truth, ladies and gentlemen, is that in the last index of rankings issued by the World Bank, Trinidad and Tobago placed 102 out of 190 countries, with its average score approximately 25 points adrift from New Zealand which sits at the top of the table. At the same time India has seemingly found the magic formula that has allowed it to crack the code and leap frog 30 places into the top 100 nations club in terms of business friendliness. The fact is that there was no magic bullet.

Closer examination of the initiatives undertaken by the Narendra Modi Government of India reveals that attention was focused on four important factors: payment and collection of taxes, resolving insolvency, providing access to credit, and protecting minority investments.

The cumulative effect of their initiatives though was that the number of days to obtain a construction permit fell from 180 in 2014 to 144 in 2018. The number of hours spent to file taxes fell from 251 in 2014 to 207 in 2018; and the number of days to start a business fell from 33 in 2014 to 30 in 2018.

While these numbers do in fact tell the story of India's climb into the top rankings of the world, it also reveals for us how much more work we still need to undertake locally, if we are to make a serious dent in the manner in which we do business, particularly if we are to make the strides necessary for the diversification of the national economy.

Perhaps more poignantly, it reveals to us who are tasked with the responsibility of managing this economy through waters that are still quite choppy, that we are on the right track with our initiatives. The introduction of the Revenue Authority, the implementation of the Property Tax, the transformation of the TCPD and CSO into Authorities on their own, are all designed to increase government's levels of efficiency, especially now, when we are all being challenged to deliver more with less.

A conversation with anyone who has had to endure the nightmare of obtaining approval for building plans from the Town and Country Planning Division, will reveal a level of frustration that is both unnecessary and debilitating to the prospective builder. This drive to improve the TCPD's Customer Service experience therefore will be a catalyst in the changing environment of Government services delivery.

The establishment and subsequent enforcement of customer-centric service standards during the application process will ensure that the TCPD responds

more efficiently to the peculiar needs of citizens engaged in the construction process.

The initiatives to be undertaken in this regard include the improvement of the application process, enhancement of the physical infrastructure and work environment, improved quality of service to both internal and external clients, increased public education of the TCPD's roles and functions as well as the role of ordinary citizen in urban and regional planning.

The thrust therefore is to have all submissions and applications to the TCPD fully automated, in addition to having all historical land use and planning data digitized to effect a more transparent and accurate decision-making process for TCPD planners.

As the Ministry of Planning and Development drives the process towards enhancing the competitiveness of our economy by leaps and bounds, it is evident that the TCPD must demonstrate the effective capability of executing its mandate, that is, guiding the orderly and progressive development of land in Trinidad and Tobago.

In this regard, digital conversion of all records from application to approval, will facilitate easy access to all development control records regardless of the location of the physical file. This immediately removes barriers to access. Single-person handling of files (and the possibility of files 'going missing') will therefore become relics of a time past.

Digital conversion of legacy data will also improve the efficiency of back end processes like research, since information will be easily accessible in one

central digital library. There will no longer be a need for persons to spend hours hunting for information in crowded, dusty and daunting vaults, cabinets and drawers.

An Automated System, backed by a digitized, paperless information repository has both philosophical and practical underpinnings. In the first place, it responds to the Government's strategic focus articulated in Theme 2 of *Vision 2030: National Development Strategy for Trinidad and Tobago: Good Governance and Service Excellence*, which emphasizes 'strengthening the capacity and operations of the public institutions' in a bid to facilitate better service delivery.

Secondly, from a practical perspective, the implementation of Automation and Digitization which will have manifold benefits; to staff of the Town and Country Planning Division by providing them with the tools to efficiently research, assess and determine development proposals; to sister agencies who can work collaboratively with the TCPD in facilitating development through a shared virtual space; and finally to the clients and external end users who will benefit from transparency in the policies and standards which regulate land –use, as well as faster application processing times.

Faster application processing times will undoubtedly contribute to alleviating some of the stresses experienced in the construction industry at present, such as long lag times between the pre- construction and project completion phases.

Ladies and gentlemen, as two of the main government agencies involved in construction permitting, the TCPD and the various Regional/Municipal Corporations are often denigrated because they typify the inefficiencies of governance at work in a process that strikes at the heart of the quality of life enjoyed by citizens, the construction of a home or business. These agencies have also been saddled with the job of conducting numerous paper based and manual regulatory and bureaucratic tasks, on approximately 8,000 to 9,000 applications for development annually. Moreover, all services at the TCPD are free, increasing the burden on our already burdened staff. Additionally, the TCPD has the task of processing status of land letters for stamp duty purposes and liquor licence applications, not to mention the day to day tasks of creating and updating planning policies.

I anticipate, ladies and gentlemen, that the Ministry of Planning and Development, the Ministry of trade and Industry and all other stakeholders involved in the administration of the construction permitting process will benefit from the expansion of TTBizLink through the review, optimization, and simplification of their processes, improved client satisfaction and capacity building. The solution being provided today will be expected to integrate seamlessly with TTBizLink and the existing systems being utilized by stakeholders.

Of the many benefits to be derived from the introduction of this system, there are two which I eagerly await. The first is the enhanced level of service and responsiveness to applicants for development through a 24-hour availability

of the system; and the second is the standardization of forms and requirements across agencies.

In so doing, Trinidad and Tobago will join its CARICOM colleague Jamaica, in having at its disposal an online system for the application and approval of construction permits. The seamlessness of the system, also contains within it the possibility of not only easing the frustration of local citizens and businessmen, but also our regional and international counterparts.

I harbor no reservation in my mind, ladies and gentlemen, that with the effective implementation of the initiatives my colleagues and I have outlined today, Trinidad and Tobago's ranking on the ease of Doing Business index will improve. While it might be fanciful to think we could emulate India's feat, I dare say it is not outside of our thinking.

Today then, as this piece of rubber hits the road, we are all poised to benefit. I have no doubt that as the ease of doing business in Trinidad and Tobago increases, more and more persons will begin to take the leap of faith necessary to invest in our country. We are doing it better, and we are on course to succeed. May God bless us and bless our nation.