

NGOs lobby govt on public transport

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BEIRUT: With billions of dollars poised to be injected into revitalizing Lebanon's road networks, a new coalition of NGOs and experts are preparing to ensure public transport systems aren't overlooked. The Capital Investment Plan for infrastructure development that Lebanon prepared ahead of the 2018 CEDRE conference in Paris contains proposals for 24 projects for improving the country's transport sector. The bulk of these investments aim to raise the quality of Lebanon's highways. The World Economic Forum has ranked it at 120 out of 137 countries. Some 400,000 cars enter Greater Beirut every day, making more than 5 million individual trips within the capital, and each carrying an average of 1.2 passengers.

To tackle the ensuing congestion, the CIP has earmarked \$5 billion to complete Lebanon's highway network, beginning with the Dbayeh motorway, which is notorious for its rush-hour gridlock as commuters travel to and from work in Beirut. However, a group of public transport NGOs is instead seeking to switch the policy focus from facilitating travel by private car to developing sustainable public transport networks.

With this in mind, six organizations Wednesday launched the TRACS Transportation Coactive, to gather expertise from different transport stakeholders and academics and create a "sustainable transportation plan" to present to Cabinet. While in 2005 the Council for Development and Reconstruction prepared a "strategic document" for transportation development projects, there is not yet an official strategy for the Public Works and Transport Ministry. According to the World Bank, some of the CDR's projects have been "on the government priorities for decades and have not been implemented due to complexity and high cost."

Standing between two rusted steam engines at Mar Mikhael's disused train station, the site chosen for the project's launch, its coordinator, political activist Ziad Abs, said that the time was ripe for TRACS' creation, following the formation of Cabinet at the end of January.

The coalition, Abs said, has two principal goals.

First, to put pressure on lawmakers and various government departments to take action to improve Lebanon's public transport network.

Second, to call on Lebanese academics to lend their expertise to the coalition, contributing to the creation of a sustainable transport sector for future generations.

According to Marc Haddad, assistant professor in engineering at the Lebanese American University, academics will play an important role in the coalition "by building bridges between NGOs, who are used to working alone, and unifying their voices."

TRACS' first priority, Haddad told The Daily Star, is to produce a policy white paper on developing sustainable public transport that is both "informative for civil society groups and Lebanese citizens ... and a plan of action for the government."

Chadi Faraj, who helped develop Lebanon's Bus Map Project, told The Daily Star TRACS could be considered "a bottom-up strategy," as it will use the expertise of small NGOs focusing on specific sectors to help change Lebanese citizens' attitudes toward public transport. "We want to show people there is a system," Faraj said, and fight the "stigma about using buses in Lebanon."

Last March, the World Bank approved a \$295 million package that would include the purchase of 120 buses to service 40 kilometers of dedicated bus lanes from north Lebanon to the heart of Beirut.

The coalition wants to ensure this project comes to light.

Jawad Sbeity from Bike Lebanon told The Daily Star the coalition was "looking for easy wins" in the public transport sector to tell policymakers "look guys, it's doable ... it just needs a political push"

As with the bus network, Sbeity spoke of a stigma against biking, saying that "people used to disguise themselves when they went cycling." The NGO, which began in 1997 as a small bike rental company, now supports 13 different organizations across the country to encourage cycling and recently developed a proposal for the creation of 8 kilometers of cycle lanes in Beirut that will be submitted to the municipality for approval.

Rehabilitating Lebanon's railway is one of the 24 projects set out by the CIP, namely with an estimated \$90 million project for the Tripoli-Syrian border route.

For decades at the beginning of the last century, Tripoli's now-abandoned railway station was the terminus of the iconic Orient Express line.

However, many of Lebanon's train tracks have now been built over and train cars and engines left to rust after damage to the railway inflicted by the 1975-90 Civil War.

"The railway has become a top priority of the government," Nabil Doumani from the NGO TrainTrain told The Daily Star, "because of the benefits it can provide, whether in transporting goods or passengers, or easing congestion."

In January, Transport Minister Youssef Fenianos met with Ziad Nasr, the director-general of the Railways and Public Transport Authority at the ministry, to study concrete plans for restoring the train network.

TRACS hopes to continue coordinating with the minister and lawmakers to open a dialogue on improving all forms of mobility while ensuring its sustainability.

Members of TRACS will be able to support the government's work when things are going to plan, but "push when things aren't going right ... so that it takes the sector seriously," Haddad said.

He also lauded the "openness and willingness" with which ministers and government agencies had treated plans for developing a sustainable transport network during preliminary meetings with TRACS over the past six months, adding that "rather than having an adversarial relationship with the government, we're trying to open a dialogue."