

Engineers worried that SA lacks capacity, expertise to deliver on roads promises

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South African Road Federation professional adviser Malcolm Mitchell.

There would appear to be an inability in South Africa, with some exceptions, to deliver the country's roads programme effectively, says South African Road Federation professional adviser **Malcolm Mitchell**.

This is one of the findings of Mitchell's discussions with 20 experienced roads engineers in the country, revealed in a paper set to be delivered at the thirty- second Southern African Transport Conference, running from July 8 to 11, at the CSIR International Convention Centre, in Pretoria.

In the paper, titled Towards Sustainability of the South African Road Network, Mitchell also finds that there is a lack of professional capacity and expertise in the roads sector; inappropriate interference by politicians in executive functions; poor financial management of roads funds (once again with some exceptions); ineffectiveness in addressing the country's overall roads goals; an uncomfortable relationship between the provinces and local roads authorities in metropolitan areas, and a lack of an adequately dominant role in the roads sector by the Department of Transport.

Mitchell suggests that South Africa's three tiers of government, all with strong powers when it comes to providing roads – as well as a large number of second-tier agencies controlling the inter-city network – rob the country of the agility, responsiveness and effectiveness it needs to manage the roads sector.

He asks if there should not be a reduction in the number of roads administration units.

In view of these findings, any new agencies should be given clearly defined powers and should account for their performance. Government's role could also be limited to strategy, with the agencies freed up to continue with the task at hand.

Mitchell says all this could go a long way towards improving delivery of South Africa's roads programme, effectively distributing resources and jurisdictions, as well as improving cost effectiveness.

“In light of the current situation regarding the management and condition of much of our roads network, there is a compelling case for a new paradigm in respect of institutional arrangements for the provision of roads in this country,” Mitchell writes.

Money is not necessarily the problem either, he adds.

“Road maintenance in South Africa is possibly adequately funded at the moment, but actual expenditure is ineffective and inefficient, resulting in significant wastage and unnecessary high levels of deterioration.”

Mitchell adds that the roads sector has also become unattractive to the right kind of staff.

He says there is a shortage of adequately qualified technical and professional staff, and that this results in indecisiveness in decision-making, poor work procedures, political micromanagement and a lack of good governance.