

Justice and Peace Department Southern African Catholic Bishops Conference

Press Statement on E-tolling and government accountability

Faced with the widespread public concern, protest and unhappiness at the decision of Government to go ahead and implement the e-tolling system, we as the Justice and Peace Department of the SACBC feel compelled to highlight some of **the key moral issues underpinning this decision**:

1. The Accountability of the Executive

Government has a mandate to govern, by virtue of having won an election. Does this mean that they are unaccountable until the next election? Clearly not! Transparent public consultations on controversial issues are bound to be held and taken into account. We fear that this has not been adequately done in this case.

2. Taking due care when utilising funds appropriated from the people of the country

When it appears that the cost of a solution being implemented by Government to address a need is highly inappropriate then it is the duty of all concerned people to demand explanation. Brushing this aside by citing the need for confidentiality breeds suspicion. Transparency is one of the cornerstones of democracy.

3. The appropriateness of the cost of the GFIP project

It appears that the GFIP project will cost R20.63 billion to construct and a further R20 billion in interest over 24 years, thus totalling R40.66 billion. The e-tolling solution costs around R1.7 billion to construct and a further R1.2 billion per year to implement, totalling R30 billion over the 24 years. So the cost of implementing the e-tolling is almost 74% of the total cost of the project! This hardly seems appropriate!

4. Are there alternatives to e-tolling to pay for the new roads?

Government could simply raise the fuel levy on the 22 billion litres of fuel sold yearly in SA by a meagre 10.04 cents to allow treasury to raise the requisite R2.21 billion per year. Why is this not considered?

5. The costs of the upgrades done during the GFIP – are they all above board?

It began with a cost of around R2.2million per lane-kilometre in 2004. By 2006 the project had changed to a projected cost of around R4million per lane-kilometre. By 2008 - a cost of around R7.42million per lane-kilometre! By June 2012 – a cost of around R12.37 million per lane-kilometre.

These massive escalations in cost indicate that some serious investigations need to be initiated regarding possible corruption or price-fixing.

6. Is it reasonable to 'Privatise' existing public roads?

Existing freeways, which serve as the main arterial routes within the economic hub of our country, have been appropriated to create toll roads, while no viable alternative routes exist. This is a serious abdication of government responsibility for public property.

7. What impact will this e-tolling have on the poor?

Anything that raises the costs of doing business in the core of our SA economy, will impact on the cost of living, and will disproportionately impact on the poor. This will inevitably hurt the poorest amongst us, at a time when there have been far too many attacks on their ability to survive. Why are we investing in more expensive public infrastructure that fails to address the desperate need for an integrated public transport system that is affordable?

We therefore call for the immediate suspension of the GFIP e-tolling project and a full-access review of it by an appropriate forum (the public protector, the auditor general or a judicial enquiry), and we appeal for a re-think regarding alternative methods of funding it.

We also call on all Catholics, all people of faith and all people of goodwill who are concerned about these issues:

- To take the time to acquaint ourselves with the facts surrounding this project and the decisions made by Government in this regard. It is incumbent upon us to ensure that we understand the options and the alternatives.
- To come together to consider ways of taking this matter to our parishes and to our communities, and of showing the authorities how we feel.
- To support and collaborate with actions that are being taken on these issues by other organisations such as COSATU.
- Not to collaborate with the e-tolling procedures until all the matters of concern have been addressed appropriately.
- To assist in making government accountable to the people of our country, to assist in ensuring that public funds are utilised for the betterment of all our people.
- To expose and fight corruption in every sphere and on every front.

We would like to publicly support the OUTA-led appeal regarding the Review application, which is due to be heard later this year in the Supreme Court of Appeal.

Bishop Abel Gaba
Chairperson

Bishop Kevin Dowling
Vice-Chairperson

Press Statement Ends>>>

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Please see the attached document for more details on our thinking regarding these important issues.