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The cost of bypasses – Martin Mendelsohn

Throughout the world business moves to people and to the traffic routes that carry people to congregate in certain places. This is particularly clear in many towns. Compare Okahandja and Otjiwarongo, which are similar in size. Drive through Otjiwarongo and one sees a bustling town centre with all sorts of businesses that have grown along the main street over the last few years. Okahandja's centre on the other hand appears to have fewer businesses than ever before.

In the 1980s the B1 passed through Okahandja in the same way as it does through Otjiwarongo today. If one wanted to travel past Okahandja one had to go through it. Then the **first** Okahandja bypass was built. Suddenly there was a massive drop in traffic going through the town. Passers-by weren't bringing money to Okahandja anymore, and its centre decayed. The bypass allowed people to move quickly past the town, but the road cost a massive amount to build and devalued the entire city centre and local economy in the process. Opportunities dwindled and the value of existing investments in the town centre decreased.

The placement of the bypass road created a new magnet for growth some 500 meters west of the old town centre. New investment and development slowly occurred around the new bypass, eventually leading even to the building of a shopping mall. Now this is the business centre of Okahandja. People will always move to where they have opportunities.

The most active business hubs in Otavi, Keetmanshoop and Mariental are the petrol stations, which lie on the edges of the economically quiet remainders of these towns. The centres of Usakos, Otjiwarongo, Outjo and Grootfontein are relatively vibrant because they are not bypassed, figuratively and literally.

Imagine, now new bypasses may be built around Okahandja, Otjiwarongo, Omuthiya and Oshakati - Ondangwa. What would happen to all the business and investments made in these places?

Bypasses reduce travel time and congestion caused by heavy trucks making their way through narrow roads in towns. But they also damage the economies of towns, by diminishing opportunities for the people living in many of these places. Roads should create activity, not destroy it. Namibia should be built for the people that live in it, not the cars that drive through it.