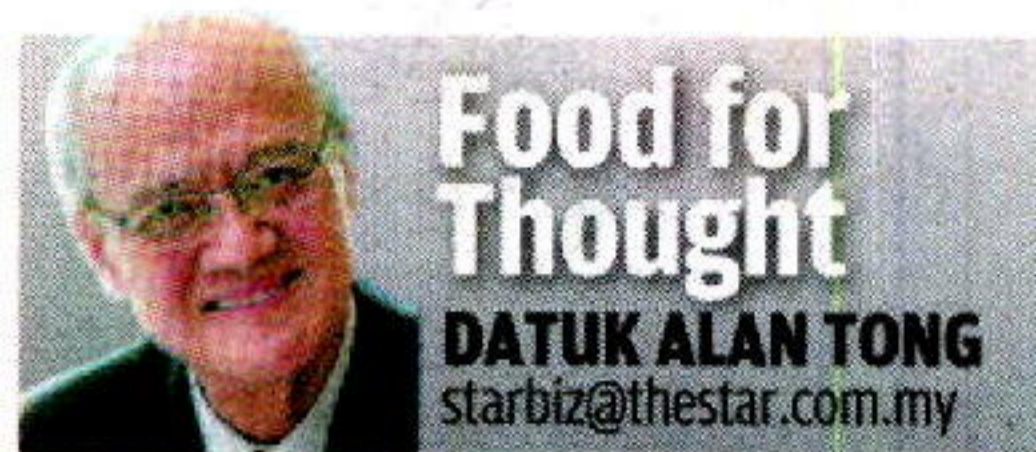


Should we park and ride?



Food for Thought

DATUK ALAN TONG
starbiz@thestar.com.my

RECENTLY, one of my long-serving staff decided to give up her job. In most cases, people leave a job for greener pastures. Her case was different.

She lives at one end of Kuala Lumpur (KL) and works at the other end of KL. It would be reasonable to believe that travelling within KL should be a breeze. Yet, on average she spends up to three hours each day on the road to travel to and from work. While she loves working with the company, the tiring years of spending many hours on the road has worn her down and her family time has been greatly shortened.

To many, the announcement of the Klang Valley My Rapid Transit (KVMRT) project is like a timely rain to ease the drought. The development of public transportation dictates the ease of mobility and connectivity in a city, which is a key factor for KL to become a world-class city, and for Klang Valley to elevate to the next level.

Attractive line

Being an architect and a developer, creating quality lifestyle has always been my keen interest, and I do look forward to the development of KVMRT. The first Sungai Buloh-Kajang line that has 51km in total length is expected to generate great benefits along the route once it is completed.

It will attract more people to move into Klang Valley, achieving the mission of growing the Greater

KL's population, and eventually spurring the development of the country.

As the MRT project shoulders the important role of changing lifestyles of a huge population, it is important to be prudent in every single detail right from the planning stage to ensure the desirable outcomes are achieved, to the benefit of all, including the owner and operator of the MRT, as well as its end users.

Serving its purpose

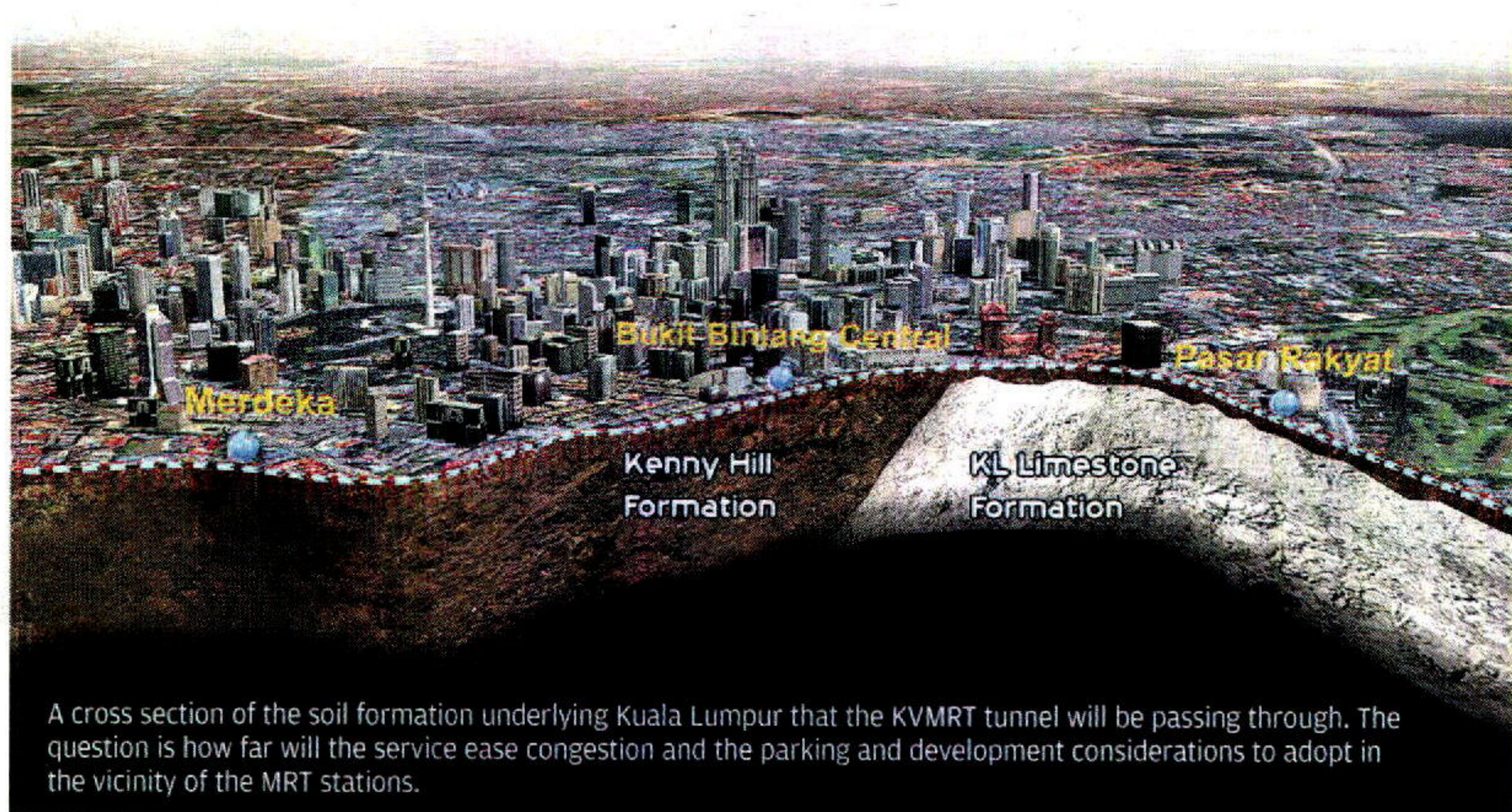
Based on the plan, the Sungai Buloh-Kajang line is targeted to serve a catchment of 1.2 million people with 31 stations in total. Thirteen of these stations are expected to have the park-and-ride facilities. How viable are these facilities? Will they do more harm than good in solving the issue of traffic congestion, scarcity of land for housing and preservation of environment?

Before we delve further, let's ask ourselves this question: "How far are we prepared to walk under Malaysia's tropical weather?"

Answers may vary but the average acceptable distance will be 300m to 500m. If this is the comfortable distance for people to walk to the MRT stations, how many cars can we accommodate within the neighbourhood of this radius? How big a space should be allocated as parking bays next to the stations?

If one acre is allocated, it can only accommodate 150 cars, which is too few to satisfy the demand.

If the car park area is increased to three acres for 450 cars, it will be a huge waste of valuable space as the land next to the MRT station is a prime property. The construction and maintenance costs of these car parks will result in high parking fees



A cross section of the soil formation underlying Kuala Lumpur that the KVMRT tunnel will be passing through. The question is how far will the service ease congestion and the parking and development considerations to adopt in the vicinity of the MRT stations.

for the users. Unlike shopping complexes which can charge reasonable parking fees to attract more shoppers and in turn, subsidise its car parks' maintenance cost.

In some developed countries, the same piece of land would be used to develop high rise dwellings or commercial buildings.

For example, instead of constructing a car park, the same three acres can be utilised to build 450 units of apartments of 1,200 sq ft each.

The idea of constructing 1,200 sq ft apartments will also attract more middle income group who can afford to own cars to use MRT instead. This will generate more volume to the MRT stations, increasing the economy of scale and thus lowering the price of ticket.

These stations will eventually become centres of attraction for commercial activities, creating more business and employment opportunities for the areas.

In addition to constructing high-rise buildings nearby the stations,

feeder buses can be used to increase the accessibility to the MRT station. The MRT operator must ensure the feeder buses are frequent and timely in delivering reliable services to MRT commuters. Another option is to build covered walkways to encourage more people to use the MRT facility.

Riding quality

In order to attract people to stay near the MRT stations, noise and pollution from the MRT system should be reduced. One of the most effective ways of doing so is to go underground.

We should have more underground stations to ensure the quality of living for those who stay around the stations. Such areas can later on be expanded to become commercial hubs, complementing the existing business activities on the ground, such as what have been practised in Singapore, Hong Kong and Taipei.

Going underground may be

expensive. Nonetheless, one has to consider the economic and social impacts of MRT stations in the long run. If it is not viable to go underground, are there any other options that are worth considering? What about building an elevated tunnel enclosed with fiberglass (similar to our KLIA's Skytrain) to cut down noise pollution?

There are many possibilities that can be explored with the development of MRT system. With proper planning, MRT system can ease the traffic flow and enrich quality of life for the people living in Klang Valley. However, with park-and-ride stations, the concern is, does it serve the purpose of easing traffic congestion within if MRT commuters still need to drive to MRT stations?

● Datuk Alan Tong is the group chairman of Bukit Kiara Properties. He was the FIABCI world president in 2005-2006 and was named Property Man of The Year 2010 by FIABCI Malaysia.