

NEW STRAITS TIMES: Trains should play a larger role in public transport

Rail way forward

ACCORDING to the chairman of the Land Public Transport Commission (SPAD), Tan Sri Syed Hamid Albar, investment in rail projects is expected to reach RM160 billion by 2020. This includes the Klang Valley My Rapid Transit (MRT) project, due to be completed in 2017, but excludes the high-speed rail project linking Kuala Lumpur to Singapore, which is still the subject of a feasibility study. Apart from increasing the capacity of the other components of urban rail — light rail, monorail and commuter trains — in the Klang Valley and the double-tracking and electrification of the West Line of KTM Bhd's national network, plans for the future development of rail transport appear to be very much in the sidings. And understandably so, as SPAD came into being only a short time ago.

+ That said, nobody can accuse the commission of letting grass grow under its feet or taking a narrow approach in developing a national master plan for public transport. The studies to explore the possibilities of extending the monorail and MRT lines suggest that SPAD will not leave the job half done as in the past. More significantly, its plan for Greater Kuala Lumpur signals that urban rail will serve as the backbone of the public transport system, integrating seamlessly with buses and taxis. As trains are demonstrably better in addressing rush-hour traffic jams and frequent gridlock caused by inclement weather in the big cities, this modal shift to rail makes sense.

In this regard, as rail also holds a clear advantage over air or road travel for journeys of around two to three hours, it has the potential to become a major transport mode in medium-distance inter-city travel. But to cut journey time, double-tracking and electrification of the entire network is obviously needed. In addition to replacing the slower diesel locomotives with electric trains, new lines are required. Certainly, there has to be a rigorous assessment of the costs and benefits of the KL-Singapore high-speed rail project. But when it could reduce travel time to 90 minutes, dismissing it as a risky, needless luxury misses the point. As the European experience suggests, high-speed trains are economically feasible. Moreover, building a new railway could be cheaper and less disruptive than tinkering with the existing mainline. In any case, there should be a balanced approach to transport policy, with the rail sector playing a larger and revitalised role. For this reason, the focus should not only be on increasing investment to boost railway capacity in the cities, but also across the country.

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