

Getting a grip on urban public transport

MRT as part of an efficient transport system is vital to make Kuala Lumpur a great city

THAT the Kuala Lumpur/Klang Valley area needs great improvement in public transport is undeniable for upwards of five to six million people who live and work in this area, with many of them having to commute long distances to get to work.

A key part of making a large city like Kuala Lumpur and its environs liveable for work, play, leisure and learning is an efficient urban public transport system. Look at every great city in the world – London, New York, Paris, Berlin, Moscow, Sydney, Tokyo, Hong Kong and Singapore – and its hallmark is a well-functioning public transport system which can transport commuters quickly and cheaply through the city.

Only an efficient and well-planned system can move large numbers of people during the morning and evening rush hours for a large city. At the heart of such a network is a mass rapid transit system or MRT, and this is in turn supplemented by other modes of transport such as walkways,

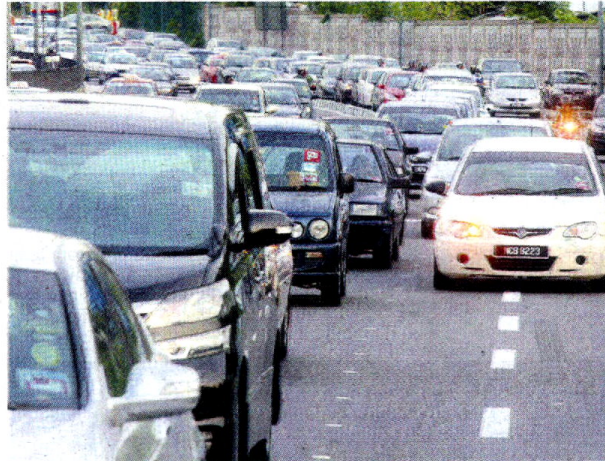


buses, taxis and commuter trains.

Our share of public transport in urban transportation is a mere 16.4% compared with Hong Kong's 87%, for instance. To improve that figure to anywhere near Hong Kong's, we badly need a major MRT already in the works.

It is a complete fallacy to allege or believe that we are sitting on our haunches, waiting for all the line extensions and new lines planned right up to 2020 before we begin to sort out all our urban transport woes.

We have done plenty of work already, using a holistic approach which aims at simultaneous improvements of all our modes of transportation. We have set ambitious targets



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for these and many are being achieved.

No, we are not pushing through the MRT because there is a lot of expenditure involved and it will contribute to economic growth. We are pushing it through with the greatest and utmost urgency because we badly need it – we needed it many years ago.

Because we lacked an efficient means to transport people, Malaysia has the highest vehicle ownership after the United States. For just 28 million people, we have 11 million cars and nine million motorcycles. With about four million households, the average number of cars per household is more than two!

Because of insufficient capacity for urban transport and the cheap prices of petrol and cheap costs for maintaining a car, there has been an explosion in car ownership which has considerably contributed to the urban crawl.

Our first strategy is not to restrict cars on the road by such methods as increasing petrol prices and having area licensing fees for cars entering congested zones during peak periods – the so-called push strategy. We can't unless we provide an alternative first.

That's why we are putting a lot of emphasis on the pull strategy whereby we increase the capacity of the public transport system, make it more affordable, easier to use and more people-friendly.

Some of these will take time, such as the new lines for public transport for Greater Klang Valley, which is an

essential and vital part of making the transport system efficient and ensure that it reaches everyone.

We are pushing ahead strongly by awarding tenders rapidly and transparently. We have kept the public informed at every stage and we have sought to obtain the buy-in of all stakeholders. We must get the MRT off the ground and going, otherwise KL's transport system will eventually grind to a complete halt.

Immediate targets

Our more immediate targets are quite tough. The Prime Minister has set a target for the share of public transport by the end of 2012. Considering that it was just 10%–12% in 2009 and the private transport share continues to rise with ownership of cars, we have a tough task – we need to increase the use of public transport.

We shall try very hard and if we fail in this area, it won't be for lack of trying. Still our achievements have been tremendous. In 2011, ridership on public transport during peak morning hours actually went up by 85,000 commuters, an increase of more than a third when compared with 2010.

In terms of customer satisfaction we targeted 50% and achieved 53%, or 106% of target. For the bus peak load factor we targeted 56% and got 96% for an achievement rate of 171%. Our overall composite scoring came in at 108%, indicating overall over-achievement.

Basically what we did was to increase capacity and efficiency on all the various modes – rail, buses and taxis – and improved integration within and between them.

Briefly (you can go to our website for details), in rail we enhanced KTM Komuter and LRT frequencies and capacity by increasing cars per train and the capacity of cars. There are also ongoing and planned expansions of the light rail transit (LRT) systems and the KL monorail system.

For the bus system, we have put in 470 more feeder buses to revamp and upgrade the feeder bus system, refurbished a total of 1,102 bus stops in the Klang Valley in 2010 and 2011, and introduced the New Bus Ticketing System (NBTS) to integrate the cashless Touch 'n Go fare payment in buses with the other modes of public transport.

There is a new business model for taxis which the Prime Minister has already announced. It will emphasise owner-operated taxis instead of the current system of largely third parties who hold licences. We are thinking in terms of centralised taxi services system and our ultimate aim is to make our taxis on par with the best in Asean.

We want to integrate all these through pedestrian linkages, parking facilities for park-and-ride, and a ticketing and automated fare collection system which works across all systems. Some of these are already in implementation.

Concomitant with integration will be the upgrading of facilities, including KTM station upgrades, building of bus terminuses outside or on the edge of the city to reduce congestion (known as Hentian Akhir Bandar) and the setting up of intra-city transport at frequent intervals to move people through the city.

Obviously there is much to be done before Kuala Lumpur and the Klang Valley has an integrated and well-functioning transport system but we are already off to a good start. The MRT is taking shape, the LRT and monorail are being expanded, and existing facilities are being used to their limit and beyond.

For all you know, it may already be time for you to leave your car at home and take public transport to work. Give it a try, you may enjoy the ride!

● **Datuk Seri Idris Jala** is CEO of Pemandu and also Minister in the Prime Minister's Department. Reasonable comments related to this column are welcome.