



(From left) Kuala Sepetang, formerly known as Port Weld, housed the first train station to Taiping built in 1885. How things have changed. The Pasar Seni MRT station has bright blue panels which are meant to represent the rippling water at the confluence of Sungai Gombak and Sungai Klang, while its trapezoidal shape is inspired by the Gombak Selangor Quartz Ridge. The underground MRT stations, like the one in Bukit Bintang, stand out with unique trapezoidal shapes and glass and steel structures.

# Connecting a nation



The old trunk road at Ayer Hitam, Johor, and the North South Expressway. After the formation of Malaysia, road development was one of the important elements for national growth.



A GOOD road and railway network is essential in nation-building as it draws the far-flung corners of a country closer. Good roads and railway lines also help ease the passage of people and goods, allowing commerce and industry to flourish.

So, it is not a surprise that the first railway line in Malaya, which ran from Taiping to Port Weld (now Kuala Sepetang), was built following the discovery of tin in Perak. This line became operational in June 1885.

However, what is much less known is that tin also spurred the beginning of road-building in Malaya in 1860, with Tengku Menteri Ngah Ibrahim, the Orang Besar Jajahan Hilir Perak, lashing together timber with strips of rattan to form rudimentary roads in order to facilitate the transport of tin from Kamunting (near Taiping) to Port Weld – a feat that happened 25 years before the first railway arrived.

With an abundance of tin in the Kinta Valley, Perak was way ahead of other states when it came to building roads, as these were in alignment with British colonial economic and social interests.

The first road was quickly followed by a second one in Selangor, which connected the tin mines in Ampang with Kuala Lumpur.

Post-Merdeka, Perak hosted Malaysia's first ever stretch of tolled road, a 20km stretch from Tanjung Malim to Slim River that opened in 1966 to all classes of vehicles.

This relatively short stretch was built by the Public Works Department, which allowed light vehicles to use it starting in 1964.

The construction of this tolled stretch put

## OVER SIX DECADES



Malaysia ahead of its regional peers in terms of implementing the "user pays" principle.

User (or beneficiary) pays is a pricing approach based on the premise that the most efficient allocation of resources occurs when consumers pay the full cost of the goods or services they consume.

Thankfully, there has been a good mix of tolled and toll-free roads across the country.

The prime example of tolled road is the North South Expressway (NSE), which was fully opened in 1994.

Stretching for 772km, the NSE is the longest controlled access expressway in Malaysia, spanning from Bukit Kayu Hitam in Kedah to Johor Baru.

Linking cities and towns across seven states, the NSE acts as the backbone of the west coast of the peninsula and has undoubtedly spurred development along the alignment, other than cutting short travel time for many people.

### Five-year National Development Plans

After the formation of Malaysia in 1963,

subsequent five-year national development plans placed road development as one of the important elements for overall economic and social growth.

In 1986, there were four million vehicles traversing over 24,000km of roads.

By 2010, Malaysia had a population of 28.3 million, 17.4 million private vehicles and 11.7 million registered drivers.

Near-exponential growth in road mileage could be seen from 2010 to 2015, with the length of paved roads ballooning from 137,219km to 230,300km.

This is hardly surprising, considering that in the 10th Malaysia Plan (2011-2015), the Government emphasised the construction of roads and rail to spread the benefits of development "far and wide".

Plans for roads became even more focused by the time the 11th Malaysia Plan (2016-2020) was unveiled.

According to the Economic Planning Unit, the first focus is the development of an integrated "needs-based" transport system, while the second focus is on "increasing the growth in logistics, as well as trade facilitation".

At any case, the focus on road building places Malaysia in a favourable light when benchmarked against its regional peers.

For example, the Global Competitiveness Report 2014-2015 ranked Malaysia in the 25th spot in terms of its infrastructure compared with 144 other countries.

However, in the 11th Malaysia Plan, various analysts had expressed concern that the continued growth of private vehicles had to

be reined in for the sake of sustainability.

According to the National Land Public Transport Masterplan overseen by the Land Public Transport Commission (SPAD), the use of public transport in urban areas hovered at 16.4% in 2011.

"Under the masterplan, we intend to increase the modal share of public transport to 40% by 2030," said SPAD chief executive Mohd Azharuddin Mat Sah



(pic)

This will be achieved by lots of rail building other than improving the state of buses, taxis, and multimodal connectivity, which includes enhancing the pedestrian experience.

After 60 years of Merdeka, road building will now be accompanied by frenzied growth in rail building such as the MRT2 (the Sungai Buloh-Serdang-Putrajaya line), MRT3 (the Circle Line), LRT3 (from Bandar Utama to Johan Setia, Klang), the East Coast Rail Line from Gombak to Wakaf Baru, Kelantan, and the high-speed rail from Kuala Lumpur to Singapore.

Penang is also eyeing its own LRT system, while plans are being firmed up to construct a cross-border LRT or MRT service from Johor Baru to Singapore.

"Even as road building continues, there must be concerted efforts to remove vehicles from roads such as putting freight on rail and getting people to leave their cars behind," said Azharuddin.

"The focus should be on moving people and goods, not vehicles."