

FOCUSWEEK

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FOR ENTREPRENEURS

Easing the jam ahead

For now, many drivers rather stew in the Klang Valley gridlock than opt for public transportation. But there is light at the end of the tunnel

IT costs us up to RM24.7 bil every year. It burns up to 487.8 mil man hours annually. It caused this article to be submitted two hours later than intended (sorry, Editor). We are talking about traffic congestion in the city, but who isn't? The daily crawl on the roads is the urbanites' conversation starter, common ground and convenient excuse. No surprises as to why we are stuck - the proportion of urban commuters taking public transportation is only around 20%; the rest use their own vehicles.

A third of federal roads in Peninsular Malaysia - many of which leads into city centres - are severely congested, according to the Works Ministry's Highway Planning Unit.

But some traffic experts see a silver lining in the cloud of carbon monoxide emissions. To Lee Choy Hin, managing director of G&P Highways and Transportation Sdn Bhd, the standstill indicates that our economy is alive and kicking.

"If there is no traffic congestion in a city centre, then the city is economically stifled and businesses cannot flourish," he explains.

On the other hand, we are bleeding time and money on the road. Part of it is self-inflicted - Lee points out that driver misbehaviours like queue-jumping, crisscrossing on lanes and accident-causing recklessness aggravate congestion. But the other part has to do with urban planning and policies.

To ease congestion, according to Lee, the challenge lies in designing a transportation system that maintains a sustainable business environment without causing inconvenience.

Our government seems game for the feat. Kuala Lumpur recently raised street parking rates in the central business district (CBD) to encourage people to take public transport or carpool. New highways are in the pipeline, partly to ease traffic. The Putra Heights-Kuala Lumpur LRT extension has begun services while the MRT construction presses on.

Are the roads clearing up with these measures in place?

Still clogged

Willy How parks his car on a street in Desa Sri Hartamas when he goes to work. Since the city parking rate hike, the area's rate has been raised and revised several times. From 50 sen per hour, it was initially increased to RM5 for two hours, then lowered to RM1.50 per hour,



SHARIL AMIN ABDUL RAHIM/FocusW

The daily traffic congestions, commuters face burn up collective time, effort and money. Good urban planning and policies can turn things around



Lee says traffic jams are a sign of a flourishing economy



by FOONG LI MEI

Rosli says the policy that allows the private sector to build highways is at odds with the zeal to reduce traffic congestion

then RM1 per hour.

The rate increase did free up parking areas in the busy commercial zone. What did not change was the traffic congestion when exiting the area during rush hour, according to the advertising accounts manager.

Why doesn't How hop on a public transport instead?

"I live in Bandar Mahkota Cheras, and the nearest train station is in Bandar Tun Razak. However, my township is so congested that it takes me about 30 minutes to escape the area sometimes. And then I'd have to

drive to the LRT station at Bandar Tun Razak, which is another congested area. I'd rather drive all the way to work," explains the 31-year-old.

A check on the MyRapid journey planner also shows that from Bandar Tun Razak LRT station, How would have to take a train to Masjid Jamek, and then take a bus to Desa Sri Hartamas. A return trip would cost him over RM10 a day.

Yam Soo Lee, a banker who works in Pudu, has similar experiences. With the rate hike in place, she can easily find street parking when having lunch out of office. Getting out of KL after work, unfortunately, remains a bumper-to-bumper nightmare.

Why we drive

The parking rate hike is part of the "push and pull" strategy to ease traffic in the CBD areas, as KL mayor Datuk Seri Mohd Amin Nordin Abdul Aziz told *The Star*. He pointed out that 3.5 million



vehicles enter the city daily, with 70% being single-occupant vehicles (SOV).

In other words, public transportation works to "pull" people off the roads, aided by the "push" from higher costs of driving into the city.

This may work, if done right. The problem is that many people feel the push but not the pull.

Commuting on public transportation can take three times longer than driving. An average trip that takes 47 minutes door-to-door by car balloons to a 153-minute trip by bus and 105-minute trip on rail, a Land Public Transport Commission (SPAD) survey found in 2014.

The limited first-and-last mile connectivity (how people get to and from the public transport stations) and erratic bus schedules are also a turn-off.

Transits also tend to underserve the urban low-income families who cannot afford to live in the better-connected city centre. In 2012, only one in two households among the poorest groups owned a car, according to the *Malaysian Economic Monitor 2015* by the World Bank.

These vehicles intensify the congestion in a country that is third highest in the world for car ownership - Nielsen revealed in 2014 that 93% of Malaysian households own a car, and 54% own more than two.

Public transport authorities have been trying to improve matters. Yet, the reality is that push factors - like raising parking rates - are introduced at a time when many urbanites like How see limited viable methods to enter CBD other than by car. Roads, in turn, remain choked.

This way to congestion

To unclog roads, we build more of them. Despite protests, it's a go for at least four new highway projects in Klang Valley: the Petaling Jaya Dispersal (PJD) Link, East Klang Valley Expressway (EKVE), Damansara-Shah Alam Highway (DASH), and the Shah Alam-Ulu Kelang Highway (SUKE). All have been trumpeted as traffic-easing solutions by developers and advocates.

According to many traffic experts, having more roads do not alleviate congestion. The more space opens up, the more vehicles will emerge to grab it. Economists call this "induced demand". A 2009 study conducted in the United States found that if a city increases its road capacity by 10%, the amount of driving in that city also goes up by 10%.

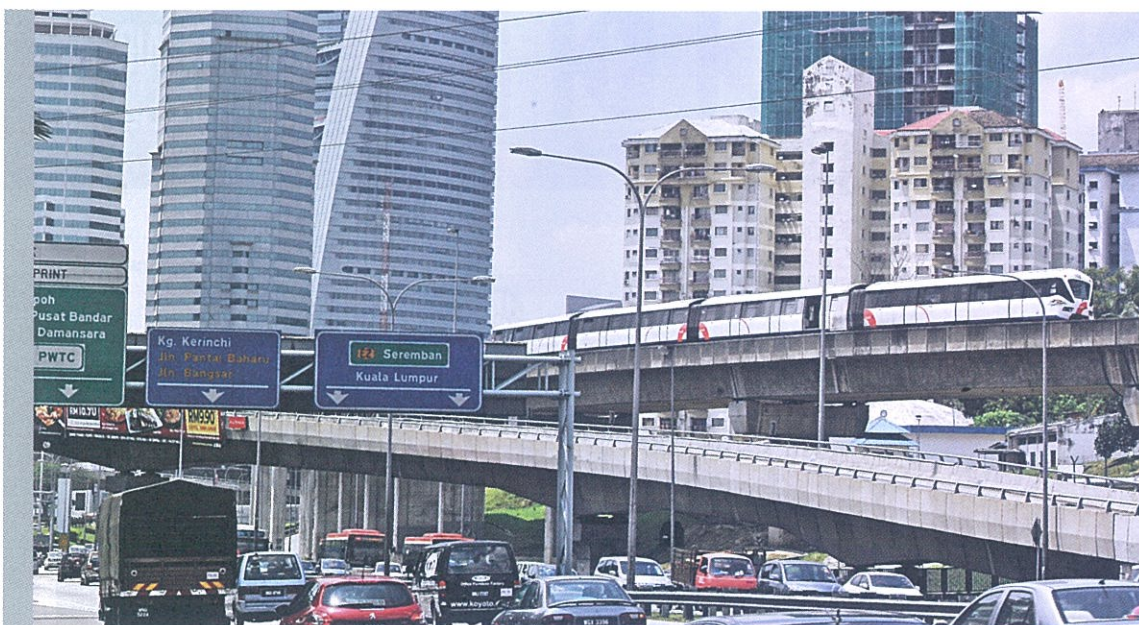
According to Dr Rosli Khan, managing director of MDS Traffic Planners and

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Modal share (%) of public and private transportation usage

Year	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	Target (by 2030)
Public Transport	17	16.4	19.6	20.8	18.1	19.6	40
Private Transport	83	83.6	80.4	79.2	81.9	80.4	60

Source: SPAD



Experts recommend better public transport services to ease the traffic congestion, especially when it comes to first-and-last mile connectivity

► From previous page

Consultant, the policy that allows the private sector to build highways is at odds with the zeal to reduce traffic congestion.

“Private companies are profit-making bodies, so they will propose new highways at places that are projected to give them the maximum volume of traffic. Volume of traffic translates to revenue,” says Rosli.

The revenue is not merely in the form of tolls. Rosli notes that developers often build new townships adjacent to highway projects as the access to CBD will attract buyers. However, these property owners end up having little means to get around but by driving. This, he says, is observable along the Kajang Silk Highway, Kemas Highway, Kemuning-Shah Alam Highway (LKSA), Lekas Highway and Guthrie Corridor Expressway (GCE).

“Buildings are the ones generating traffic; the office blocks, condominiums and so on. Our research shows that the occupancy rate in most apartments is only about 60%. But the city continues to construct more high-rises, and this would only mean more roads to connect them,” Rosli points out.

Expanding on the theme is a World Bank finding that our development policies encourage urban sprawl. Certain areas are less densely-populated than others, and this raises the cost of efficient, well-connected public transportation. Thus, driving becomes the default.

Rosli believes that traffic on highways remains a tangle because nobody is taking ownership of the congestion – not the local governments approving the developments, not the urban planning agencies and not the highway authorities.

Transport and road planning is not even governed by a single authority. SPAD is in charge of public transportation, but the Works Ministry handles roads and highways. This, the World Bank says, may mean limited coordination between the planning of urban roads and transit despite their interdependence.

SPAD, however, tells *Focusweek* that it has always collaborated closely with the Works Ministry and other government agencies. Nonetheless, it seeks to “enhance existing working relationships” with these authorities.

Transit-oriented plan

Rosli points out that the ideal traffic plan requires comprehensive studies on how all modes of transportation link to properties.

“Malaysians seem to have a mental block; every development has to be road-based. We allow commercial zones to be set up without considering rail access and other public transport facilities,” he says.

Lee from G&P agrees that our cities are designed with drivers in mind. This is reflected in the requirement for developers to submit a traffic-impact assessment when proposing a new construction project. Developers have to consider upgrading the roads or modifying junctions to improve road-using experience.

Policies encourage urban sprawl



Mohd Azharuddin says SPAD is hard at work to revamp our public transport system

In other words, they aim to solve drivers' problems.

“Instead of focusing on traffic impact, the authorities ought to assess developers' plans in terms of connectivity with the nearest transit station to reduce dependency on private cars,” Lee suggests.

This will be a step towards the transit-oriented development (TOD) that advanced countries adopt. TOD refers to urban planning that makes transit stations the nucleus for commercial and housing development. This way, driving becomes a choice, not a must.

Lee says the government should look into “urban renewal”, which is to revitalise the commercial activities around an existing transit station. At the same time, future transit projects should be planned alongside new commercial areas, not installed as an afterthought to finished developments.

He is also heartened to see more developers prizing transit. Even premium condominiums in Kota Damansara and KL city centre now boast easy access to train stations.

“The common mindset that public transport is for the low-income folk only should change. In fact, an efficient transit network is the status (symbol) of advanced countries. Being a world-class city means having a transit system that draws people of all income levels,” says Lee.

Public transport, according to Lee, would be attractive only if the entire journey is safe, comfortable and predictable. Other than providing seamless public transport connectivity, urban planning must also be pedestrian-centric – cool and covered walkways, and well-kept transit stations.

“It is also important to promote these facilities to draw higher patronage. There are already pedestrian facilities, like air-conditioned



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– Lee Choy Hin

walkways in the heart of KL, but I notice that many urban folks are not aware of its existence,” says Lee.

Improvements in the pipeline

SPAD knows that the public transportation network needs work, and it's on the case. The commission's CEO, Mohd Azharuddin Mat Sah, tells *Focusweek* that an additional 175.5km of rail lines in the form of LRT and MRT networks will be installed across Klang Valley by 2022. This is on top of the total existing rail lines of 439km.

In the meantime, the KTM services are also getting an upgrade. By 2020, wait time for the notoriously infrequent train service is to be shortened to, at best, 7.5 minutes.

On the problem of buses underserving areas not connected by rail, especially in urban low-income areas, Mohd Azharuddin says that this is because buses make a beeline for more lucrative routes.

To solve this problem, SPAD has been revamping bus networks since eight months ago. Bus corridors were reorganised. The GPS system installed in the vehicles enables the commission to track its performance, such as routes covered and punctuality. As buses no longer resort to undercutting on fares on the same routes, SPAD claims that operators are seeing higher ridership and revenue.

A new app may also mitigate the unpredictability of transit time. The app, which SPAD aims to launch by the end of this year, is designed to help users find the best public transport options for their trip based on real-time information.

Besides boosting the number of feeder buses, SPAD is “looking forward to receiving Cabinet approval for a proposal on taxi transformation”. Just this month, the Cabinet has given the green light to e-hailing services such as Grab and Uber. This is expected to improve first-and-last mile connectivity – a SPAD online survey had found that 30% of trips via e-hailing services were to train stations.

Will all these be enough to wean us off driving? The likely answer is that no one really knows. The World Bank notes that our urban transport planning is based upon reports and documents that cannot agree on current travel demand levels, and how an intervention (like improving a transport service) will affect commuters' behaviour.

SPAD does not have any in-depth study into the impact of public transportation network on traffic congestion, but it is looking into conducting one, according to Mohd Azharuddin.

There is encouraging news, though. Rail operators have been recording a rise in the daily average ridership for the past five years. Last year, it was 631,680 – an increase of 13,553 from 2014. Bus ridership during morning peak hours rose 14% in the corresponding period.

More public transport users, unfortunately, do not necessarily mean fewer people are driving. Modal share between public and private transport users fluctuates year to year (see chart on page 1), according to SPAD's analysis.

In the meantime, cars are getting cheaper. The National Automotive Policy (NAP) 2014 aims to reduce car prices gradually by 20% to 30%. Will this derail SPAD's efforts in drawing people to transits?

Mohd Azharuddin appears unperturbed. “It's a good thing that people are buying cars; it's good for the economy. The important thing is that during peak-hour traffic, people will choose to take the transit to work instead of driving. The cars can be reserved for weekend or getaway trips. We don't see [the NAP] as contradictory to public transportation policies. Both are needed for the country to grow.”

The point, he says, is to provide commuting options.

“It enables people to choose what works best for them,” he concludes.

Indeed, the mark of an advanced country may not be smooth roads, but citizens having choices. **FocusW**