

Is the RM40 bil high-speed rail link on?

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It has been almost a year since the prime ministers of Malaysia and Singapore announced that the countries would build a high speed rail link from Kuala Lumpur to Singapore. Yet after 11 plus months, the taxpaying public hardly know anything more about the multi-billion ringgit project. What gives?

In the jungle everything is seasonal – there is a time for migrations and a time for the flora to bloom.

One might say, it is much like ideas in the realm of Malaysian politics, development and economic planning – where ideas seem to come about in cycles (the bad ones especially – just as you think they have been forgotten, they are rehashed).

An example of such an idea that has been coming about in cycles over the past year is the proposed RM40 billion (chances are prices will rise) KL-Singapore high speed rail link (HSR link). The first attention grabbing headline came when it was announced by the countries prime ministers, and you would have been forgiven for thinking that the two governments had figured out how the project was going to be undertaken (they had not), how it was going to be funded (not quite sure) and if, most importantly it was feasible (studies are pending).

Tiger is a big believer in the value of information, as it helps her stay prepared, vigilant and allows her to make the best decisions – she imagines most Malaysians share her sentiments on the issue; statements or announcements are useless without information and details.

Yet consistently over the past 12 months although the idea of the HSR link comes up every now and then – all that is actually known about it is about the same amount that was revealed at that initial press conference.

Firstly it is still not known how the project will be undertaken and what role each country will play – it is bad enough that they did not at least have a basic idea of how they wanted to go about this in the first place, worse that they have not been able to come together in the past 11 plus months to figure it out.

Prime Minister Najib Abdul Razak said that in terms of funding the project will probably be based on a public-private partnership, yet crucial questions of how and who can afford to take this on have still gone unanswered.

Then there is the feasibility studies – questions like whether building such an expensive link will be worth the time and effort, will there be a sufficient catchment, will the project be able to generate enough income to at least pay for its upkeep and will the project have the necessary multiplier effects to justify its price tag – all remain unanswered.

Tiger has always found it curious that multi-billion ringgit plans are announced before the relevant feasibility studies are done (it is all seems rather cart before horse, to this Tiger). But what really bothers Tiger is that close to a year later...still nothing!

Shortly after the project was announced, the Land Public Transport Commission (SPAD) said they were in the final stages of the the HSR Phase 1B feasibility study, saying that it would be completed by June 2013. It is unclear if this has been completed, if it has it does not appear to be readily available to the public.

In early January, SPAD chief executive officer Mohd Nur Ismail Mohamed Kamal said that the feasibility study is in its final stages of the pre-tendering phase, while SPAD's website says it anticipates to have it completed by May.

So basically as much is known by the tax-paying public about this project today, as was known about it almost a year ago. All we have heard is how promising the project is, and what a boon it will be for the country.

Perhaps the government will say that it is important to get it right, that feasibility studies must be comprehensive and that there must be no rush.

Tiger certainly hopes so, as it is preferable to the alternative suggestions that some who are in the know may be using the delays to position themselves to take full advantage (read:unfair) of this multi-billion project.

If that is the case then Tiger will wait patiently, paws crossed for the relevant details and studies to be released – she will be curious to see however, if as much time will be given to the public to digest these studies and voice their concerns and opinions as has been taken to produce them.

Tiger certainly hopes so!

GRRRRR!

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