

CLEARING THE JAM

Numerous studies have been done, plans drawn up and measures implemented, but the country's public transport system remains woeful. Duplication and lack of coordination between operators and authorities alike seem to be a perennial problem. Would having a national transport policy help?

By Ooi Sue Hwei



Leave your cars behind: How can the authorities get more people to use the public transport system?

IN a sudden turn of events, the government has decided that its proposed RM4.4 billion upgrade of the country's public transport system will now be undertaken by the private sector.

While details are not very clear, Prime Minister Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi has said the project would be carried out via private finance initiatives (PFI).

Under it, he explained, 'the government would pay rent for the use of a facility over a long period of time. With the guarantee of rental income from the government, banks will be more willing to bankroll such projects taken up by the private sector.'

The announcement has opened a floodgate of questions. How will the projects be carried out? How will the rental be calculated? Indeed, would this be a drain on taxpayers' money? Our attempts to contact the Economic Planning Unit (EPU) for more details were unsuccessful.

While any effort to improve the state of the public transportation system, notably in the Klang Valley and Penang, is welcomed, could there be drawbacks to the latest plan?

In many developed and developing countries, the public transport system is either state-owned or state-operated and heavily subsidised. This is to prevent private entities from focusing solely on the bottom line, for example, by operating only on lucrative routes and ignoring the others. For

the public transport system to be effective, it is important that it meets the needs of a neighbourhood or community.

While the government seems to be very positive about using PFI to improve the efficiency of public projects, the Federation of Malaysian Consumer Associations (Fomca) questions if this would result in increased cost to consumers.

Its research manager, Cheah Chee Ho, says since the exact structure of the PFI has yet to be revealed, 'the government should have firm control over the public transport system and uphold its duty to provide safe, quality, affordable and accessible public infrastructure and services to consumers'.

Some members of the public, too, are not enthusiastic about the idea. Malaysia University of Science and Technology associate professor (transportation and logistics), Moazzem Hossain, questions the practicality of using PFI to upgrade the public transport system. This is especially in light of the government's move, under its Integration and Restructuring of Public Transport System in the Klang Valley (Inspak) programme, to take over responsibility for the private sector-run light rail transit (LRT) and bus services.

According to Moazzem, there are few rail-based metro transportation systems that can run on farebox revenue alone and that most are dependent on government subsidy.

It is not just consumers who are concerned. Dr Rosli Azad Khan, who runs MDS Transportation Consultants, speaks for the transport operators when he says: 'While fares have not kept up with inflation, the cost of operation continues to rise. If this trend continues, transport operators would be at the losing end as even interest on their borrowings surpasses returns from their business.'

Ninth Malaysia Plan to the rescue

The Ninth Malaysia Plan (9MP), with its emphasis on the development of an integrated and efficient public transport



system in the Klang Valley, has more than doubled the allocation for urban transportation to RM1.56 billion, compared with the previous plan.

The 9MP will also focus on the expansion of LRT and commuter train services, procurement of more rolling stock and buses, and enhancement of existing stations and park-and-ride facilities.

The government's vision is to make Kuala Lumpur a mobilopolis – a city that offers great mobility, accessibility and choices – by 2012. The target is to improve the public-to-private transport ratio to 30:70 in five years' time.

In line with this, a commission would be set up to regulate the public transport system in the Klang Valley. It would be responsible for the planning, coordinating and licensing of all public transport modes.

Is the target a realistic figure? Is it achievable or just wishful thinking?

In analysing the 9MP's call for more highways, flyovers and other transportation infrastructure, investment advisory Capital Dynamics Sdn Bhd says such building activities would themselves cause traffic jams and disruptions to traffic flow.

It urges that better systems, planning, design and coordination be put in place

before such construction projects are initiated.

Studies have shown that in 2003, only 16% of the people in the Klang Valley used public transport. Back in 1985, the figure was higher at 34%. The use of private cars has leapt to 71% from 47% for the same period.

More recently, Rangkaian Pengangkutan Integrasi Deras Sdn Bhd (Rapid KL), the company tasked with integrating the light rail and bus transport systems, has found that 1.5 million people drive to the city daily, while only about 500,000 use public transport.

According to the EPU's data on light rail services, while the ridership figure has been on the rise, the increase is slow (*see Table 1*). Still, measures must be taken to improve the figure if the government's target on public transport use is to be met.

Public transport system issues

According to the Kuala Lumpur Structure Plan 2020, the decrease in the usage of public transport is partly attributable to higher personal affluence leading to an increase in car ownership.

Although traffic management measures introduced in the past have done much to ease traffic flow, it is only a temporary solution as it cannot increase road capacity levels if traffic demand continues to grow.

In fact, increasing road capacity by constructing new roads and widening existing roads simply prolongs the problem until more roads are built. This also posts another problem as most areas in Kuala Lumpur are built up and land acquisition for road development is becoming more difficult and expensive.

Probably the most pressing issue the Kuala Lumpur Structure Plan has identified is the overlap and duplication in the functions of the various agencies responsible for the transportation network,

TABLE 1: AVERAGE DAILY RIDERSHIP ON URBAN RAIL SERVICES

	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005
Star LRT (Ampang/Sri Petaling line)	88,801	91,702	107,082	120,426	125,208
Putra LRT (Kelana Jaya line)	143,778	149,105	154,869	160,361	165,695
KL Monorail	-	-	23,872	33,837	44,442
KTM Komuter	57,339	60,504	67,522	74,960	85,733

Source: Economic Planning Unit

which has led to conflicting policies or programmes (see Table 2).

This has resulted in difficulties in formulating consistent policies for public and private transportation, leading to inadequate coordination. One good example is Inspak, which is tasked with establishing the Klang Valley Urban Transport Authority to regulate public transport.

Established in July 2003, the committee is also responsible for encouraging greater use of public transportation to reduce traffic congestion. The question is, if Inspak is already responsible for such duties, what is the purpose of setting up a commission under the 9MP to regulate public transport systems in that same area?

Another issue revolves around Rapid KL's expansion plans when it launched the Area 3 network of bus services. Almost immediately, the plans have encountered bumps as the Ampang Jaya Municipal Council has

called for a postponement of the project.

The reason given was that the council was not informed of the new system and needed time to study it. This is a clear example of the lack of coordination among agencies.

While the usage of rail services has been encouraging, the Kuala Lumpur Structure Plan points out that optimal usage has yet to be achieved due to inadequate interchange facilities at stations, lack of integration between rail-based stations, and poor support services including inadequate feeder bus frequency and service coverage.

These issues are examined in greater detail in a research paper entitled 'Urban Public Transportation System Integration' conducted by Moazzem in collaboration with the Massachusetts Institute of Technology in the United States.

The project, which is ongoing, aims to investigate the best approaches to achieving an integrated system of operations and communications between public transport providers in

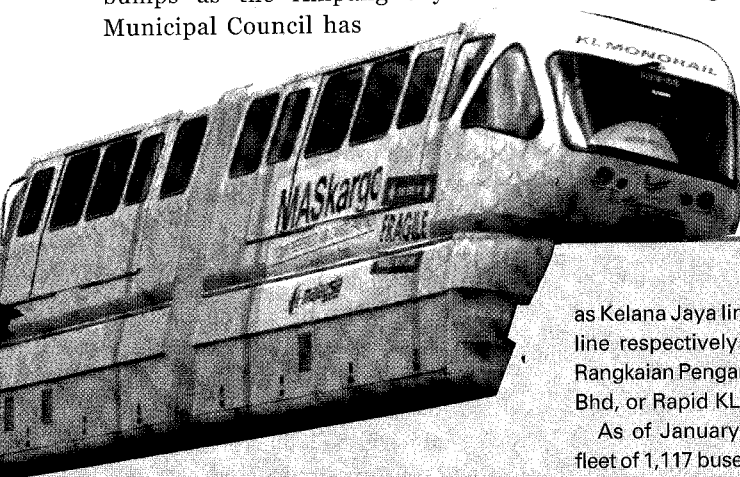
Kuala Lumpur.

As of the middle of last year, the study shows there was a lack of integration between the light rail systems and bus services. There were also lapses in physical integration for weather protection, road crossings and walking distances, service integration in matched arrivals, frequency and span of service, as well as system integration in ticketing, fares and information.

While the integration of the rail and bus network is vital for a better public transport system, will putting more buses on the road actually help in the long term? Would that not just contribute to the existing congestion? Would the additional buses be reason enough for the public to leave their cars at home?

An office worker, who takes the bus to work daily, says attempts to introduce better bus services would only provide piecemeal solutions because these vehicles are equally susceptible to the complex traffic problems.

MDS' Rosli feels a more holistic approach to resolving the public transportation issue



THE RAIL ISSUE

LAST month, Syarikat Prasarana Negara Bhd (SPNB) was awarded the contract to develop the light rail system network in the Klang Valley. The RM10 billion upgrade will include RM4.5 billion to build a 30km line in densely populated areas, RM2 billion to buy hundreds of light rail coaches, and RM2 billion to extend the existing light rail transit (LRT) services to Subang Jaya and Old Klang Road.

The company's CEO, Shaipuddin Shah Harun, revealed in press reports that part of the funding would come from the Ninth Malaysia Plan allocation. How much allocation would it obtain? SPNB did not respond to queries from **Malaysian Business**.

(The state-owned company owns both the Putra LRT and Star LRT systems – now known

as Kelana Jaya line and Ampang/Sri Petaling line respectively – as well as buses under Rangkaian Pengangkutan Integrasi Deras Sdn Bhd, or Rapid KL.)

As of January this year, Rapid KL had a fleet of 1,117 buses, which it hopes to increase to 1,500 by the end of next year. Is this enough considering that an estimated 180,000 people use the bus daily, a number which is expected to double in two years' time?

Between SPNB's two rail systems, the Star LRT is underutilised by one third of its capacity while Putra LRT has overshot by 40%. Some members of the public question if it would be wise to extend the latter to highly populated areas like Subang Jaya given that it has already exceeded its capacity.

Another concern is, has a study been conducted on why the Star LRT service is underutilised? Has it conducted a feasibility study on the areas it plans to extend to?

Earlier, SPNB had announced that it was evaluating tenders to supply new train carriages and that the winning proposals

were to have been announced last month. So far, there has been no news on the issue.

At the same time, the company also stated it would be awarding a contract to build the new lines in the middle of this year. Would there be an open bid for this project to ensure SPNB gets the best offer?

In January, SPNB had announced it would spend up to RM280 million to add 600 new buses to its fleet of 1,237 vehicles. At that time, Shaipuddin had said: 'Cost, although very important, should not be the overriding consideration. In an extreme example, the cost may be very cheap, but there may be sacrifices or trade-offs along the way, which may not be acceptable.'

He said the company's guiding principle would be to accept the lowest acceptable proposal, 'with emphasis on the word "acceptable", which denotes a comprehensive evaluation'. What kind of evaluation has it conducted?

On the other hand, KL Infrastructure Group Bhd, the monorail system operator, has submitted plans to extend its light rail

is needed. 'The crux of the public transport problem is caused by the mass migration of people. As development projects are focused on the Klang Valley and the major cities, the existing systems are not able to cope,' he says.

While any attempt to resolve the public transport woes is admirable, actions by certain quarters have become questionable.

Early this year, Shaipuddin Shah Harun, CEO of government infrastructure company Syarikat Prasarana Negara Bhd (SPNB), had announced that the public transport system in Kuala Lumpur and Petaling Jaya would be overhauled at a cost of RM2 billion. (SPNB owns the Kelana Jaya line and Ampang/Sri Petaling line, formerly known as the Putra LRT and Star LRT, as well as buses under Rapid KL.)

At the same time, KL Infrastructure Group Bhd, operator of the monorail system, has submitted a proposal to build four more transit lines.

Upon closer examination, the two plans seem to be in conflict (*see box story on 'The Rail Issue'*). Will the public end up being

network. The company plans to build four more transit lines serving Petaling Jaya, Subang Jaya, Sungai Buloh and Cheras, covering 71km, with 62 four-car monorail trains.

Comparing the SPNB and KL Infrastructure plans, several issues come to mind. The most obvious is that the latter's light rail network only has seven integration stations. Is this enough to promote usage of public transport among the public?

With KL Infrastructure's proposed Petaling Jaya Monorail Line and Subang Jaya Monorail Line, as well as SPNB's extension of the Putra line to Subang Jaya and the existing KTM Komuter train service, wouldn't there be an over-concentration of rail services in the township? Wouldn't the public benefit more by having the services in areas with no such facility?

Instead of competing, how can KL Monorail, Putra and Star cooperate to form an integrated public transport system? Is there a master plan to synchronise the various public transport providers? **mb**

TABLE 2: URBAN TRANSPORTATION RESPONSIBILITIES - FEDERAL AND LOCAL GOVERNMENT DEPARTMENTS

Federal Government/Local Government Tier	Departments Related to Transportation
Prime Minister's Department	- Economic Planning Unit - Federal Territory Development and Klang Valley Planning Division
Ministry of Home Affairs	- Royal Malaysian Police
Ministry of Works	- Public Works Department - Highway Planning Unit - Malaysian Highway Authority
Ministry of Transport	- Road Transport Department - Department of Railways - Railway Asset Corporation
Ministry of Entrepreneur Development City Hall Kuala Lumpur	- Commercial Vehicle Licensing Board - Urban Transportation Department - Public Works Department - Enforcement Directorate

Source: Information Book: Dewan Bandaraya Kuala Lumpur, 1993. Dealing with the Malaysian Civil Service

the victim of the war between the rail operators?

Fomca's Cheah feels the lack of a national transport policy is one of the main factors in the current state of the public transport system. As a result, many developments, particularly in urban areas, are haphazard and uncoordinated, including between the various states. While the EPU has been tasked with the development of the policy, it is not known when it will be ready.

Cheah says some of the elements that should be included in the national transport policy are:

- A modern, safe, quality, affordable and equitable public transport system;
- An extensive, integrated and sustainable mobility coverage for the rural and urban populations, with public transport operators balancing their need for profits with their social obligations to ensure accessibility to rural areas;
- Promoting environmental protection such as low emission vehicles, efficient and sustainable use of energy resources and reduction in pollution;
- Soft measures to encourage public transport use and reduce personal car usage to lower traffic congestion and pollution;
- Urban development plans, particularly in new housing areas, which must be integrated with planning for public transportation;
- More equitable development between rural and urban areas to reduce migration and income disparity; and
- Better transport governance such as the

creation of a single transport authority or housing, planning and transport boards to streamline and coordinate development and planning across states.

Rosli supports the idea of having a National Transport Policy. In addition, he recommends that a study be carried out on the needs of the public transportation sector with the purpose of encouraging the public to leave their cars behind.

He says public transport should not just concentrate on urban areas like the Klang Valley at the expense of people in the rural areas.

A member of the public suggests that government departments and private companies with a large workforce provide transport for their employees. He gives the example of Astro, which provides free transport for staff from certain locations to its office in Sungai Besi. He says the government could encourage this by providing incentives to companies that do so.

Resolving the woes of the public transport system also calls for cooperation among the various departments and agencies. In a recent press report, the Commercial Vehicle Licensing Board (CVLB) urged the Kuala Lumpur City Hall, the Road Transport Department and the police to work together to carry out stricter enforcement on bus operators which cause traffic woes in the city centre.

Similarly, rail system operators should also come up with an integrated rail expansion plan that benefits the public. **mb**