



MRT is no silver bullet solution to transport woes

At 150 kilometers long and costing a whopping RM36.6 billion, the Kuala Lumpur Mass Rapid Transit (MRT) without doubt is Malaysia's largest infrastructure project thus far.

The construction of this mega project is scheduled to start this July with the first line from Sungai Buloh to Kajang, covering some 60km and with 35 stations running up to the city centre.

Upon completion, this iconic project would cover a radius of 20km from the city centre and when fully operational would serve up to two million passengers per day.

The construction of bus and rail terminals is also expected to increase the public transport modal share in Greater KL from 12 percent in 2009 to 30 percent in 2015.

Senator Idris Jala, Minister in the Prime Minister's Department, was quoted recently as saying "By 2020, at least 50 percent of the KL population must be on public transport."

Malaysia, he said, had a per capita car ownership that was higher than that of the United States and Germany, with 20 million cars for a population of 28 million.

However, a public transport activist group has expressed skepticism over the project, arguing that the MRT alone cannot solve KL's public transport woes.

"There is a prevailing sense of neglect in improving the present support systems for transit, including transit priority and traffic restraint measures on present roadways," said Muhammad Zulkarnain Hamzah from Transit, the Association for the Improvement of Mass Transit-Klang Valley.

He explained that what he meant by transit priority was measures to make the movement of public transport vehicles such as buses and trams faster and more reliable.

Whilst traffic restraint means measures to make using (not buying) private vehicles less appealing so that roads will be clear for buses to move.

Fixed existing problems first

Muhammad Zulkarnain said Transit would like to see the present travel patterns in the Klang Valley be fixed first through transit-oriented developments (TOD) surrounding existing rail stations before the government can come up with any new rail proposal.

According to him, coverage of existing rail services has yet to achieve its maximum potential not due to the lack of feeder bus coverage, but due to bad pedestrian permeability, poor bus network designs and lack of integration between transit modes.

"The 10th Malaysia Plan talks about new urbanism and on creating vibrant, compact and people-centered cities, where open spaces are designed for people, not cars.

"With the same spirit, the government should focus on creating dedicated bus lanes on congested roadways that stretch from the suburban areas to the activity centres, and from the activity centres to downtown Kuala Lumpur. A bus lane with stations in the median and priority signals at junctions can move more than 10 times as many people as a lane full of cars.

"The progress towards compact and people-centred cities must be through careful integration of land use and transit planning, which requires the fundamental mindset that accords respect from car drivers to pedestrians and from those who travel individually to those who travel collectively.

"A stand-alone rail solution will not solve the congestion problem," he stressed.

Inefficient support system

Pointing to Hong Kong and other places with good land use and transportation planning, Muhammad Zulkarnain said high-density developments are concentrated surrounding stations.

In that way, he said people could get to where they want faster and easier.

"In Malaysia, land use policies are not strictly enforced to promote TODs around existing stations. Look at Taman Bahagia LRT station, you can see cars parked on pedestrian paths.

"Access road next to the station is severely congested almost any hour of the day due to the traffic spill from the Lebuhraya Damansara-Puchong (LDP), and this lengthens the already circuitous and exhausting journey of the feeder bus.

"In the end, urban growth is still shaped mostly along motorway corridors and we have not heard of any plans to create bus lanes, especially for local transit lines. How do you think people using MRT can go to where they want if they are stuck at stations, not knowing how to get to their final destination?

"Will they still want to use such a system knowing door-to-door journey is terribly long compared to using their private vehicles?" he said.

No comprehensive master plan

Speaking further, Muhammad Zulkarnain questioned on why the mega MRT project is being approved prior to the completion of a comprehensive transport masterplan.

"How can the biggest public transportation undertaking in the country commence without a master plan which should first be endorsed by all affected stakeholders?" he asked.

A master plan, he added is very relevant to chart out how the proposed mass transit lines will jive in with local structure plans and how people's need can be met equitably and sustainably.

"The MRT is touted to solve traffic congestion in the Klang Valley. The congestion has not only affected roads leading to KL city centre but also roads linking activity centres across the fringes of KL as well.

"Our question is what is the long-term plan of the government to settle the worsening congestion on the LDP for instance. MRT and LRT (Light Rail Transit) only solve problems facing KL city centre-bound commuters who live near the stations," he said.

As for environmentalist S Piarapakaran, his main concern is more on the environmental challenges of the MRT given the fact that the transportation sector in Malaysia has been using high amount of fossil fuel.

"We can reduce energy wastage and pollution if we are to have an effective MRT system. It will also be possible if the people prefer public transportation. If planning goes awry, more energy and obviously the people's money will be wasted," said Piarapakaran, adding that MRT alone would fail to reduce the current traffic congestion problem.

Ideally Piarapakaran said a passenger who leaves his or her house should be able to easily hop into a bus or feeder bus within the first 200 metre and get connected to MRT stations.

The same passenger can use the feeder bus from the MRT stations to reach the target location he or she wants to reach.

"All this comes with good timing. In developed nations, these support systems are very crucial and they have been developing rail system with supporting systems over a long period of time," he said.

- Bernama