

Public Transportation - The Way to Go

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“We need to see public transport not as a technical means of transporting people from point A to B, but as a form of social justice.”

- Richard Burdett, Professor of Architecture and Urbanism,
London School of Economics (2007)

A. Philosophical and Conceptual Basis of Public Transportation

We need a whole new way of thinking about public transportation as shown in the above quote. Transportation is not simply a technical problem to be solved by engineers who build more roads to carry more cars. It is a social problem, an economic problem and an ecological problem.

The car industry born in Detroit over a century ago has no doubt revolutionized the world and left a lasting legacy for better or for worse. In the United States, it crowded out railway as a leading form of transportation, led to sprawling suburbanization and decline of cities, changed the lifestyles of most Americans, pushed America to foreign aggression in search of oil, and contributed greatly to environmental pollution and climate change. A one thousand kilogram machine carrying a one hundred kilogram person is not an efficient form of transportation invented by human beings. In fact, it could rank as one of the most inefficient and ecologically unsustainable form of human inventions - compared to bicycles, trains, ships and planes.

Millions of cars, each car carrying one or two passengers on the highway, guzzling non-renewable natural resource, spewing CO₂ into the air, contributing to global warming are generating major economic externalities borne by the majority of public who don't own or use private cars. Seen in this light, it is a form of social and economic injustice. While cars are here to stay, new and radical rethinking is required to address this imbalance. One of these is to impose economic surcharge on those who wish to enjoy the comfort of their private cars and subsidize those who opt to use public transportation.

While Malaysians are still far behind in adopting such a vision of public transportation, they are, nevertheless, quite ready to embrace public transportation for economic and personal reasons.

The first has to do with affordability. Globally the depletion of petroleum resources has led to an escalation of oil prices - from an average of US\$35 per barrel a few years ago to a high of \$150 per barrel in 2008. While prices have dropped to \$70 per barrel in 2009, some forecast it could rise to \$200 in the near future. Before too long, increased fuel costs will render private vehicles too expensive to operate for a sizeable portion of Malaysian population. An efficient and affordable public transport system is a necessity rather than an inconvenient option. Transportation mobility, accessibility and affordability should be considered a basic need of the people and an objective of social equity.

The second is uncontrolled private car ownership and usage defeats the objective of getting people from point A to B quickly and efficiently. Massive traffic jams has reduced, not increased, the speed of travel in cities. Most people in Malaysia are frustrated. Yet they have no good alternative public transportation system in the major cities. This is a legacy of the Mahatir era when he promoted widespread ownership of cars in order to support his dream of building Proton into a national car company. As an example, in the state of Penang with 1.6 million people there are more vehicles (cars, motor bicycles, trucks etc) than there are people.

B. Implementation - From Vision to Action

The present state government of Penang is keen to solve the traffic and transportation problem that has worsened over the years. After the Pakatan parties won the state elections in March 2008, it requested input from civil society to help tackle the transportation issue. A number of persons formed a group consisting of professionals from various walks of life with active interest in issues of transport in Penang. These included planners, engineers, environmentalist and activists in public transport.

The group met from May 2008 onwards and first submitted a comprehensive report to the state government on how to transform the Penang transport system. After several meetings with various departments and committees in the state and local governments, the state government finally officially set up a Penang Transport Council (PTC) to act as an advisory and clearing center for transportation issues in the state. There are currently about 16 members in the council and they include state and local government officials and members of the public. All public members work on a voluntary basis.

The new transport paradigm adopted by the PTC has as its vision: **Moving People Not Cars.**

The emphases of this new approach are:

1. People centric - involving people at every step of the way from planning to implementation to feedback and improvement
2. Ecological sustainability and people friendly
3. More public and less private transportation
4. Affordability, accessibility, reliability and integrated

The PTC has recommended a series of actions for the state to take ranging from short term (within 6 months), to medium term (6 months to 2 years) and long term (more than 2 years) plans. The short-term plans include decongesting traffic, clearing illegal parking on streets, improving car park systems and fee structure, improve one-way traffic flows, informing and engaging public in the projects. The medium-term plans include - starting the master plan process, improving the bus and taxi systems, introduce bus and bicycle lanes and pedestrian paths, introduce measures to discourage use of private vehicles through area road pricing, peak hours charges, higher parking fees etc. For the long term, there should be a master plan that is integrated with the land use and state and local master plans and an integrated public transport system involving bus, trains, ferries, taxis, bicycles etc.

Challenges and Obstacles

The most serious challenges facing the implementation of this vision and plan come from the political structure in Malaysia. Malaysia is supposed to practice a federal system of government. In reality, it is a unitary system of government, where practically all powers and revenue generation capability rest with the federal government. The state and local (municipal) governments have few powers and sources of revenue. The state government's only sources of revenue are the sale of state land and the levy of land taxes in the form of quit rent. Local councils sources of revenue come mainly from property assessments. Furthermore, they have no ability to raise funds (loans) from the public unless approved by the federal government. The state government depends on the federal government for loans and grants to build roads and other infrastructures. Even local issues such as issuance of transport licenses (bus and taxis), the regulation of bus routes, collection of traffic fines, collection of garbage etc. are all controlled by the federal government.

The Pakatan political parties that form the state government of Penang rule the state but are opposition parties at the federal level. Hence they face a great deal of obstruction from the federal government. Historically, the federal government discriminates against states in Malaysia that are ruled by opposition parties, as in the case of Kelantan and Trengganu. All kinds of assistance are withheld, even revenue that are supposed to accrue to the state are cut off.

The federal government controls even the bureaucracy. While all civil servants working at the state government level are paid by the state, they are federally appointed and assigned to work in the different states. Hence most owe and display their loyalty to the federal rather than the state governments. The state government of Penang has to work within these fiscal and political constraints. The challenge is to mobilize enough public and civil support for them to carry out their vision and plan.