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High Hopes For Malaysia's Mega Mass Rapid Transit (MRT)

By Melati Mohd Ariff

KUALA LUMPUR, Feb 9 (Bernama) -- 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.

The proposed MRT project which is expected to be completed by 2020 is aimed largely at easing the public transport woes for those living in the so-called Greater Kuala Lumpur (Greater KL) area.

Prime Minister Datuk Seri Najib Tun Razak embraced the term Greater KL when he announced the Economic Transformation Programme (ETP) on Sept 21, 2010 that would transform Malaysia into a high-income economy by 2020.

Greater KL encompasses 279,327 hectares covering Kuala Lumpur, Putrajaya, Ampang Jaya, Petaling Jaya, Subang Jaya, Shah Alam, Kajang, Klang, Sepang and Selayang.

The population of Greater KL is about six million people and the number is expected to rise to 10 million by 2020.

FOR A BETTER TOMORROW

This high-speed and large-scale MRT rail project was revealed when the Prime Minister tabled the RM230 billion 10th Malaysia Plan (2011-2015) on June 10 last year.

The project, he said was in line with the Greater KL's National Key Economic Area (NKEA) to further enhance the city's public transportation network.

Improving public transportation is one of the six National Key Result Areas (NKRAs), which is a priority under the Government Transformation Programme (GTP).

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 per cent in 2009 to 30 per cent in 2015.

According to Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia, modal share or mode split or modal split is a traffic/transport term that describes the number of trips or (more common) percentage of travelers using a particular type of transportation including public transport and private motor vehicle.

Senator Datuk Idris Jala, Minister in the Prime Minister's Department was quoted recently as saying "By 2020, at least 50 per cent 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!

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MORE ON MODAL SHARE

Muhammad Zulkarnain Hamzah, speaking on behalf of TRANSIT, the Association for the Improvement of Mass Transit-Klang Valley, a public transport activist group was a bit skeptical on the public transport modal share target for the mammoth MRT project.

He told Bernama that under the 6th Malaysian Plan, one big modal share jump to 50 per cent was targeted for year 2000 with the completion of light rail systems but it did not materialise.

TRANSIT, he said remained pessimistic that MRT alone would create a big transit modal share, meaning the percentage of commuters who use public transport.

"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," he said.

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.

MAXIMUM POTENTIAL

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 ten 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.

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.

ENDORSEMENT VITAL

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.

REDUCE FOSSIL FUEL

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.

In an interview with Bernama recently and quoting figures of the National Energy Balance 2008, he said there was a steady increase in the usage of fossil fuel in transportation sector from about 35.8 per cent between 2000 and 2008.

"Such increase definitely can be curbed if there was good development in the public transportation sector.

"In comparison, we can observe a lot of energy resources saved via effective public transportation system in the United States, Singapore and Japan which respectively record 28.5 per cent, 18 per cent and 24 per cent in energy resources allocation to transportation sector.

"This smaller portion does not come so easily. This is due to continuous development of public transportation sector to cater for growing demand," said Piarapakaran who is also President of Association of Water and Energy Research Malaysia (AWER).

TRANSPORTATION AND POLLUTION

Fuel combustion would release residues into the air including carbon monoxide, nitrogen oxides, sulphur oxide and other pollutants.

According to Piarapakaran, in concentrated locations such as Kuala Lumpur, Petaling Jaya, Seremban and Johor Baharu, the level of pollutants from vehicles are definitely higher.

"This gives direct impact to air quality index. The air quality drops further with locations that have bad traffic congestion. Badly managed traffic eventually not only waste energy resources but it also gives health impact to those directly exposed to it through inhalation," he explained.

Piarapakaran cited a 2007 health report by Toronto Public Health that concluded traffic gives rise to 1,700 hospitalisations per year in Toronto.

While majority of hospitalisations involve the elderly, traffic-related pollution also has significant adverse effects on children.

According to the Report, children experience more than 1,200 acute bronchitis episodes per year as a result of air pollution from traffic.

The study estimated mortality-related costs associated with traffic pollution in Toronto at about \$2.2 billion Canadian Dollar.

COST OF POLLUTION

A 30 per cent reduction in vehicle emissions in Toronto is projected to save 189 lives and result in 900 million dollars in health benefits.

"We do not have any such studies in Malaysia linking health impacts due to traffic pollution. Ever wonder why? However, there are academic literatures available in medical studies for many countries, which prove health impact due to traffic pollution.

"Even the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) had carried out similar studies in Austria, France and Switzerland. Such study only proves that reducing pollution via effective public transportation has good impact to the nation by saving lives, environment and give a good economy sense. Will we be able to deliver such effect through the MRT project?

"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.

MORE QUESTIONS

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.

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