



Penang transport plan flawed, more study required

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Increasing supply of more roads will just create more demand for their usage

FMT LETTERS



From: Penang Forum steering committee, via email

The Chief Minister of Penang recently used an accident on the first Penang bridge to justify his proposed RM27 billion transport master plan. This is disingenuous: it is like arguing that more highways are needed because of traffic jams caused by accidents on the North-South highway.

Penang Forum is not against the idea of a transport master plan. In fact, NGOs first encouraged the Penang State Government to initiate a master plan in 2009. The Halcrow transport master plan was the result of that initiative. But since then, the plan has undergone significant changes. We express grave concern over several issues regarding the current proposed transport master plan.

Scale and priority

The overriding motto of the transport master plan is “moving people not cars”, yet the rhetoric does not match the facts. Of the estimated budget of RM27 billion, and possibly even more than RM30 billion, the lion’s share, about RM17 billion, goes to building more roads for cars rather than on public transport. The priority should be reversed: 70% of the budget should be for public transport and 30% for roads.

For example, instead of building a tunnel to accommodate cars, why is there no effort to explore converting two lanes on either the first or the second Penang bridge for trains or LRT? This will cut down the budget considerably. Or in the worst case, if a separate tunnel is needed, it should be for trains and not for cars.

The vision put forth by the state is an old paradigm that does not work because it addresses only the supply side and not the demand side of the transport equation. It looks at only increasing the supply: more roads and tunnels for private vehicles. It ignores a basic tenet of transport planning: more roads simply creates more demand for their usage.

Unless the state is willing to also initiate necessary, though initially unpopular, measures to regulate the demand for private road usage through road pricing, higher parking charges and car pooling, it will end up like Bangkok and Kuala Lumpur with a spaghetti of highways that are clogged.

We do not see these measures in the transport master plan vision. Instead, the chief minister has said before that he considers such measures as undemocratic.

There are a lot of low-hanging fruit that should have been picked but were not in tackling traffic jams. These are much less expensive and will slash massive costs. Many of these have been identified in the Halcrow plan. Some examples are better enforcement against illegal parking and illegal hawking on streets, better management of on-street parking charges and the clearing of five-foot ways for pedestrians.

These will go a long way towards cutting down traffic jams. But there seems to be no political will to implement them. Instead, the reaction is to go for mega and expensive projects.

Financial model

The financial model of the transport master plan raises many questions: it is totally dependent on the state selling land reclamation rights to private developers to pay for the mega projects.

Reclamation is a two-edged sword. While it brings in revenue for the state, there are irreversible environmental and social costs when done excessively. Hence, it should be minimised rather than maximised. (The present model opts for the latter.) One is reminded of the proverb to not kill the goose that lays the golden egg.

Another way of reducing the costs – and hence the scale of reclamation – is to rethink the financial model of providing the use of highways free of charge. This is unsustainable both financially and ecologically.

Instead, if users want to enjoy the privilege and convenience of driving on roads, rather than taking public transport when these are provided, they should pay for the service. These charges can go to subsidise more public transport if the state is serious about pro-poor policies.

People are not against paying tolls. They are against it when the concessions are unjustly awarded and one-sided. This government can show the way to managing tolled roads correctly.

Other issues

A fundamental flaw of the proposed master plan is the assumption on which the projected transport demand is based. The population projection in the master plan up to 2030 is over 500,000 people higher than the estimate of the Department of Statistics of Malaysia.

Is there an over-projection of demand for the use of roads and even the type of public transport mode proposed? Should not trams, that are less costly, be prioritised over monorail? Is there financial modelling for the running and management of each of the public transport modes? Who owns them? Who is financially responsible for running them? What happens if there are losses?

Transport planning must follow, or at least be coordinated, with overall planning for the state. It cannot be done independently of the Penang Structure Plan, which is in the process of being reviewed.

If there is so much emphasis on connectivity to the mainland and serving the people on the mainland, why is there not more emphasis on developing industries and services on the mainland, where land is relatively more abundant? Why the need to reclaim so many islands off Penang Island?

The above are only some of the many issues that must be properly and rationally studied. Meantime we should not politicise the issue and appeal to populism for support for the transport master plan. Neither should the master plan be dictated by pure commercial interest.