

S'pore urged to look at better bus connections

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A narrow view of transport alternatives and an overemphasis on traffic speeds overlook the advantage of a simpler, more "connective" bus network, participants of the 17th Singapore Economic Roundtable were told yesterday.

A "connective" - rather than a "direct" bus network where commuters take a bus directly to their destination - will have regular frequent service to reduce waiting time and offer more seamless travel. A grid is one of the best connective network types. Such a network structure features bus stops which are close to road intersections to make it easy for bus-to-bus connections, such as in Hamburg, for example.

In Singapore, however, bus stops are far from intersections; when they are not close to corners, it is difficult to create a grid of bus lines.

This was one of the points brought up during a presentation to the Roundtable entitled "Beyond Public Transport as a Choice Mode".

Organised by the Institute of Policy Studies, the Roundtable is a twice-yearly meeting of economists, business leaders and policy makers discussing and debating current macroeconomic policy issues facing Singapore. Its special focus at yesterday's session was the republic's public transport.

The meeting heard that under the conditions of Singapore's "hard-nosed bargain on land transport", there have been since 1974 strict policies to slow car ownership growth and restrain traffic. In return for this sacrifice, motorists enjoy speed and convenience, as well as a steadily improving public transport system.

But one argument is that too much speed is too much of a good thing because free-flowing traffic is obtained at the expense of alternatives such as the attractiveness of public transport, ideal bus stop locations, the safety of walking, cycling and personal mobility devices, among others.

Another example of a narrow alternative to cars is the overly strong focus on the MRT. On its own, even a massively expanded rail network will have trouble competing with a car-owning lifestyle.

As a result, the presentation concluded that the focus on traffic speed, plus a narrow vision of car alternatives, undermine the "hard-nosed bargain".

During the discussion which followed, the concept of "choice architecture" was highlighted when it was proposed that a holistic approach is required to tackle transportation issues, especially when Singapore has the highest car usage in terms of passenger-km after the United States.

Choice architecture is about how decisions are influenced by the way the choices are presented. To guide behaviour, there must be incentives, such as road pricing, and tools, such as the parking space guide system. But participants were told that economic instruments will not change behaviour; only changing mindsets will. Good policy and governance also play an important role in choice architecture.

But for policy to work and incentives to be effective, institutional changes have to be secured, said a university don. For example, one way to deal with congestion on the trains during the morning peak period is to change working hours. And this requires employers to give their employees the nod to start work later or finish earlier, for instance.