

Punitive ERP may be way to avoid gridlock

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THE possibility of punitive electronic road pricing (ERP) charges to avert peak-hour gridlock was highlighted by Minister Mentor Lee Kuan Yew yesterday.

He said that was why the Government is investing billions of dollars on new MRT lines and expressways to make sure Singaporeans have alternative travel options.

Speaking at an Institute of Policy Studies seminar on Singapore's future, he revealed that the Government had even considered cutting car growth from the current 3 per cent to zero per cent.

On the behind-the-scenes discussions leading up to the recent transport policy changes, he said: 'Shall we reduce it, next lot from 3 per cent to 2 per cent or 2.5 or 1 per cent or zero and cap the thing? Oh, there'll be a public uproar.'

'So ding dong, ding dong, feedback from all quarters, says all right, 1.5 per cent growth. But 1.5 per cent growth, if it goes on six, seven years, when your expansion of roads is less than 1 per cent, you are into another gridlock.'

'So your ERP will have to become punitive to clear the roads at peak hours.'

Mr Lee was referring to the Government's announcement on Wednesday that it would halve the annual rate of car growth from 3 per cent now to 1.5 per cent next year, as part of an overhaul of land transport here.

'So finally we decided, never mind, build this tunnel, North-South (expressway), build more MRT stations...so that there are alternatives for everybody, which means massive investments.'

Mr Lee acknowledged that transport planners did not get their sums right when they introduced ERP 10 years ago. 'Our prediction of consumer behaviour was not quite right,' he said.

'We now know that the person having bought a car will use it, whatever the cost of the ERP. So now we have a problem.'

He cited transport policy to explain why Singapore needed an 'A team' of political leaders who could think ahead and sell the best options to people, to ensure Singapore retained its competitive edge.

Some drivers questioned why the authorities set the optimal traffic speed on highways here at 45 kmh, when Bangkok got by at 15kmh.

Mr Lee made clear Singapore had to be different: 'If you do not have free-flowing traffic, you'll lose your competitive edge. All the multinationals can have a conference in Singapore, bring their managers here, they can either meet in any of the hotels or in the head office and you are at the airport and in town within 20 minutes.

'You make that two hours and you've changed the equation.'

He also predicted that the expanding web of transport links would result in higher property prices. 'If you own a property in Singapore, it cannot go down. It's a matter of time. And therefore, we say land can only be bought by Singapore citizens.'