

Putting transport policies on track

Christopher Tan

The Straits Times, 21 February 2008

EARLIER this month, Minister Mentor Lee Kuan Yew, while speaking at an Institute of Policy Studies seminar, acknowledged that the Government had got its sums wrong when it implemented Electronic Road Pricing (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.'

That is why some changes in transport policy are being rolled out, including halving the annual vehicle growth rate to 1.5 per cent from next year. The policy governing car ownership and usage, though, is not the only one being overhauled.

In the Land Transport Review revealed last month, Transport Minister Raymond Lim announced a number of other changes. They were all, refreshingly, commuter-centric.

One significant revision pertains to how new rail projects would be approved. It used to be that a new MRT line had to be commercially viable independently before it could be built. Singaporeans will remember the North-East Line saga. The debate on when to build it went on for over a decade between the Government and residents in the north-east. And when it was finally opened in 2003, the operator was allowed to keep Buangkok station closed, creating another ruckus among residents.

From now on, new rail lines can be built as long as the overall MRT network remains viable.

Another policy tweaked pertained to trunk bus services along MRT lines. Previously, bus services along a new MRT line were removed zealously. This was to avoid duplication and wastage of resources, and avoid compromising the viability of the new train line. The 'rationalisation' of bus routes was at times overdone, and created much unhappiness among commuters.

Now, the Government says it would be kosher for buses to ply mature stretches of MRT lines. This is certainly good news for commuters who have found trains too packed for comfort.

Next stop: A distance- based 'throughfare' system, and an integrated season pass for bus and train rides.

Commuters have been asking for the season pass since the first trains started rolling 20 years ago. One argument against this included not wanting people to make transfers unnecessarily. Moreover, for a common pass to emerge, the two operators had to work hand in hand - not always an easy thing.

A 'throughfare' system is much fairer, as it does not penalise commuters for making transfers, which have become increasingly necessary due to bus 'rationalisations'.

As Government Parliamentary Committee for Transport chief Cedric Foo puts it colourfully: 'If you ship something from Shanghai to Rotterdam, and the box is transhipped in Singapore and Colombo, you cannot charge the customer more. In fact, you might have to charge lower because of the time delay.'

The next profound change is the Government assuming the role of master bus route planner. Currently, it leaves the planning to the operators and the Public Transport Council. The Land Transport Authority will take over this role some time next year.

The move makes sense, as it would take the profit motive out of route-planning exercises. And it would also rectify the lack of cooperation between the two competing bus operators.

Another significant move is to introduce competition to the bus and rail sectors, so that operators are kept on their toes as far as service standards are concerned.

Rail and bus routes are likely to be parcelled out and put up for tender. Operators, local and foreign, will be invited to bid for them.

The new way is expected to be a marked improvement over the current set-up, where rivalry between the two public transport groups does not translate into real competition that benefits the commuter directly.

Less significant but no less important is the decision to erect screen doors for all surface MRT stations. These doors will prevent people from accidentally falling onto the tracks, though they may not deter those bent on killing themselves. Still, as the rail network grows, minimising track incidents will be crucial.

The car owner is not left out. A recent bugbear has been the punitive road tax applied to some high-powered hybrid cars. This is addressed with a new formula that does not diminish the attractiveness of the green car rebate.

Finally, there is barrier-free access for wheelchairs: This is a fundamental shift from the days when policymakers felt it was best to provide the handicapped and infirm with dedicated services. Today, with barrier-free access planned for all trains, MRT stations, buses and bus stops (which pretty much covers all roadside curbs), Singapore is moving towards a new level of inclusiveness.

All these initiatives, many overdue, are aimed at persuading more people to use public transport - a necessity as the island prepares itself for a population of up to 6.5 million people. The initiatives are backed by a record infrastructural investment of \$50 billion over the next 12 years.

Commuters have international consultants Booz Allen Hamilton in part to thank for the sweeping reforms. The firm was hired a year ago to help review the land transport system. Kudos should also go to Mr Lim, who was bold in changing the status quo on so many levels.

The proof of the pudding, however, is in the eating, and the minister has a huge job before him in seeing the plans through. But already, signs have emerged that things are moving in the right direction.

One such sign was SBS Transit's dividend declaration last week. For the 2007 financial year, it is recommending a final dividend of 3.25 cents, down sharply from 6.5 cents for 2006 and 5 cents for 2005. Chief executive Kua Hong Pak says the company has to set aside 'a lot more' to provide new services.

If commuters' interests had taken a backseat to shareholder value in the past, SBS Transit's decision may well be the first light of a new dawn.

The slew of changes, when realised, will in effect overturn some established policies that used to be vigorously defended. To the man in the street, this is a sign that public feedback is noted. Though the changes may not be made as quickly as the public might desire, they are possible.