

KUALA LUMPUR: Kuala Lumpur City Hall has reportedly said it aims to resolve traffic congestion in the Klang Valley by 2030. However, with about five more years to go, there are no indications that this target can be achieved.

The Madani government showed its seriousness in addressing road congestion, not only in the Klang Valley but also in major cities like Johor Bahru and Melaka, by establishing a Cabinet Committee on Road Congestion in March 2023.

The committee is chaired by Deputy Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Ahmad Zahid Hamidi.

Experts say inefficient urban planning, policies that encourage private vehicle ownership and the tendency for the agencies concerned to work in silos are among the reasons why it is difficult to resolve the nation's traffic congestion woes.

They also predict the situation will worsen in the coming years if the authorities continue to adopt a band-aid approach of merely treating the superficial 'wounds' without addressing the real underlying causes.

Experts worry that if the situation persists, efforts to develop the country's economy will not reach their full potential, asserting that traffic congestion is among the main factors inhibiting workforce productivity.

Inefficient land use

Pointing out that traffic congestion is caused by interconnected factors, public land transportation expert Wan Agyl Wan Hassan said what the authorities are currently doing is implementing steps to 'treat' the problem of congestion on specific roads.

"When a road is congested, what is their solution? Build a new road (highway). This is what the authorities are doing," he told Bernama.

"In my opinion, we already have too many roads (highways). We need to abandon this approach, which clearly does not solve the problem."

The primary cause of traffic congestion is inefficient urban planning or land use, according to Wan Agyl, who is the former head of policy and planning (Group Operations) at the Land Public Transport Commission (SPAD).

He said land use planning is done based mainly on economic growth, leading to the creation of high-density areas with no access to a proper public transportation system.

"To see how poor land use planning is here, let's take the example of the MRR2 (Middle Ring Road 2) in the Gombak (Selangor) area.

"Even though it is already categorised as F in terms of Level of Service, that is, (it has) bumper-to-bumper traffic jams and (is) severely congested in the morning, the local authorities still approve new developments there," he said.

Level of Service refers to traffic flow, which is categorised from A to F with F being the worst.

Wan Agyl said currently, three housing projects are emerging in that area, involving strata residential buildings which will undoubtedly worsen the traffic situation there.

"Let's assume one block has 30 floors and each floor has 15 homes. The total is 450 units. Current statistics show each home has 1.5 vehicles. Let's assume 300 cars leave this building to go to work at the same time. What will happen?"

"The MRR2 was built to disperse traffic flow from the city centre because MRR1 was already severely congested... this is the result of inefficient urban planning."

Contradictory policies

Wan Agyl also pointed to contradictory policies as another reason why the government finds it difficult to resolve traffic congestion issues.

"We have policies that encourage the use of public transportation but, at the same time, we have automotive policies that encourage people to own private vehicles. I say 'encourage' because it is very easy for the public to buy cars. Moreover, our country produces its own vehicles targeting the local market," he said.

It has been reported that the number of registered vehicles in Malaysia reached 36.3 million units as of October 2023, with nearly 24 million vehicles still in



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active use.

In terms of sales, locally produced vehicles, namely Perodua and Proton, continue to dominate the market, recording sales figures of 330,325 and 150,972 units respectively in 2023, far surpassing that of imported vehicle brands.

In fact, market research firm BMI, owned by Fitch Solutions, projected a 3.8 percent increase in vehicle sales in Malaysia for 2023.

Wan Agyl noted that Japan, a vehicle-producing country, makes it difficult for its citizens to own private vehicles but has developed an efficient public land transportation network to meet their needs.

"In this country, vehicle ownership is a status symbol and, at the same time, public transportation is difficult to access.

"So of course people will use their own vehicles to get around," he said, adding this situation is supported by the availability of parking spaces in city centres that charge affordable rates.

He also described the government's efforts to promote the use of electric vehicles as contradicting its objective of increasing public transportation usage.

Chaotic

Wan Agyl added in the eagerness to approve new developments, local authorities have failed to plan their public land transportation networks efficiently, especially in terms of user convenience.

"For example, the 'first-and-last-mile' aspect is completely neglected. This means no facilities are provided to make it easier for the public to use public transportation, be it buses, trains, LRT or MRT," he said, citing the lack of covered bus stops or parking areas near public transportation hubs as an example.

"Chaotic. That's what I can say about our public transportation planning... there are all kinds of problems but we don't know how to fix them."

Urban and regional planning expert Dr Noor Hashimah Hashim Lim concurred, saying the failure of the authorities to provide comprehensive solutions has prevented the public from fully benefiting from what she believes is already a good public transportation system.



While Malaysia has policies that encourage the use of public transportation, the country at the same time has automotive policies that encourage people to own private vehicles. — Malay Mail photo



Experts suggest implementing policies allowing employees to work from home as one way to ease traffic congestion in cities. — AFP photo

"The first-and-last-mile connectivity greatly influences a person's decision to use public transportation such as MRT and LRT. For instance, the map might show it takes only eight minutes to walk from the LRT station to our destination, but in reality, it is not that simple.

"So in measuring the actual distance, we must consider several other factors such as comfort and safety," she said in an interview with Bernama.

Noor Hashimah, a senior lecturer at the Department of Urban and Regional Planning, Faculty of Built Environment, Universiti Malaya, also pointed to the imbalance in urban and regional planning as one of the main contributors to traffic congestion issues.

The problem, she added, is exacerbated by the fact that each agency and ministry responsible for development "works in isolation".

"Each of them works and produces development documents in silo. For instance, local authorities can only prepare development plans for areas under their respective administration and all local authorities come under the Ministry of Housing and Local Government. Such a situation may cause imbalances in development among districts.

"The other thing is that imbalances in development may also occur between urban and rural areas since rural planning comes under a different agency, namely the Ministry of Rural and Regional Development," she said.

Expand development scope

Traffic congestion: Don't just treat symptoms but address root causes



Wan Agyl Wan Hassan

"It was implemented before but now they (bus lanes) seem to have faded away. Enforcement is not strict as private vehicles often use these lanes without facing legal consequences.

"Therefore, it is time for the government to rigorously enforce the dedicated bus lanes, including on highways. It has to plan the entire network, accompanied by strict enforcement.

"I believe if public bus services are efficient in terms of frequency and other aspects, people will certainly choose this mode of transport," he said, adding other methods such as imposing charges on private vehicles entering the city can also be introduced to mitigate traffic congestion.

Consequences

Predicting that the traffic situation will worsen in the next five years if no serious measures are taken now, Wan Agyl said among the negative consequences could be losses in terms of productivity due to workers being lethargic or quitting their jobs, along with an increase in road accidents.

"Currently, there are no studies on productivity losses as a result of traffic congestion. However, can someone who endures hours of traffic congestion give their best when they arrive at work?" he asked.

He believed that if the time spent commuting to work is evaluated in monetary terms, the country could be losing billions of ringgit each year.

Meanwhile, traffic psychology expert Prof Dr Rozmi Ismail from Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia (UKM) said studies conducted worldwide have revealed that traffic congestion is the main cause of stress nowadays.

"Road stress can have an impact on many other things," he said, not ruling out that stress can potentially lead to incidents of road rage and accidents and even be 'carried over' to the workplace or home.

He said it is not too surprising if some people quit their jobs because they cannot endure the daily traffic congestion.

"My wife works in the capital city and commutes daily from Bangi to Kuala Lumpur, enduring nearly two hours of congestion both to and from work. Every day she complains about wanting to quit her job because she can't stand the traffic," he shared.

Rozmi, head of the research cluster at the Centre for Research in Psychology and Human Well-being at the Faculty of Social Sciences and Humanities, UKM, said the time wasted on the road could otherwise be used to improve productivity.

"We only have 24 hours a day. If four or five of those hours are spent commuting to and from work, how much time do we have left for other things? In short, this situation also affects our quality of life.

"Stress also leads to health problems, prompting workers to take medical leave, which further impacts productivity," he added.

Seeing remote working or flexible working hours as the best alternatives, he said these measures will not only increase productivity but also provide a better quality of life as well as contribute to environmental sustainability. — Bernama

presented, we see a significant portion of the development allocation focused on urban areas. More funds need to be allocated to rural development."

Interconnectivity

Noor Hashimah said the authorities can also encourage the use of public transportation for those living and working in different states by improving interconnectivity.

"I have a friend who lives in Ipoh but works in the capital city who commutes by train daily as the journey takes only one hour.

"Another friend who lives in Bangsar here and works as a lecturer in Ipoh also commutes by train daily," she said, believing that if support facilities are improved, congestion in the Klang Valley can be reduced.

To ease traffic congestion in cities, Noor Hashimah also suggested establishing satellite towns equipped with various amenities including efficient communication networks, and implementing policies allowing employees to work from home.

"Some bosses may see this as an opportunity for employees to slack off but employers have ways to monitor their performance including via key performance indicators.

"Perhaps, the term 'work from home' needs to be replaced with something more positive like 'remote working,' she said, adding she is confident this could be implemented in Malaysia given the country's good internet access.

Wan Agyl, who also supports the remote working approach, said it is time for the relevant parties to think outside the box in developing solutions to traffic congestion issues, including leveraging micromobility and addressing the first-and-last-mile aspect.

"Now we have electric scooters and electric bicycles that can be used to improve the first-and-last-mile aspect, but where is the infrastructure for micromobility options?"

"These (lightweight) vehicles cannot be used on the road, nor can they be used on pedestrian pathways. Why don't we embrace micromobility by providing facilities like dedicated lanes and amending the related laws?"

He also suggested that the government enforce the dedicated bus lanes more comprehensively and strictly.



The relevant parties to think outside the box in developing solutions to traffic congestion issues, including leveraging micromobility and addressing the first-and-last-mile aspect, says one expert. — Malay Mail photo