

Reduce demand to solve traffic congestion

COMMENT

By Chia Chu Hang

IT goes without saying that a city should be designed around the people who live in it. However, we have moved away from this principle – or perhaps, we never truly adhered to it – towards a car-centric urban design, resulting in the pervasive issue of traffic congestion.

Traffic congestion is ubiquitous in major cities, especially during peak hours, and even more so during festive seasons when people drive from cities to their hometowns or favourite holiday destinations.

The congestion is so severe that a report early this year stated that motorists in Kuala Lumpur and Selangor alone spend roughly RM6.8 billion per year on fuel while stuck in traffic jams.

Furthermore, the report mentioned a study by KL City Hall, which found that motorists spend an average of 580 hours in traffic jams per year.

Unfortunately for many people, this is the only mode of transport available, given that our city was designed with cars in mind, rendering all other modes of transport less accessible or outright obsolete. Combined with the ease of obtaining a vehicle, more and more people are opting for private transport, which further exacerbates the problem of traffic congestion.

The massive amount of vehicle volume has also led to more accidents. In 2023, 598,635 road crashes were recorded, and at least RM25 billion in economic value was lost.

It is a problem that requires a solution, and the government has been trying to address it. However, the method we have consistently defaulted in revolves around two solutions: “one more lane” or “one more road”. These have been the most intuitive and easiest answers devised. With a large number of cars using the same road, it seems logical to just add more lanes to accommodate more vehicles or to divert traffic by constructing new roads or highways.

Yet, after years of building and expanding roads, it is clear that adding more lanes and highways does not work as we continue to use the same approach to solve the issue. All it does is provide a temporary relief, and once traffic volume catches up, we find ourselves back at square one, adding even more lanes and highways.

Additionally, the constant need to widen roads and build highways creates opportunities

for corruption, with the recent highway project scandal in Klang Valley, valued at over RMI billion, serving as a prime example.

Adopting road diet method

The focus on solving traffic congestion has always been misplaced. We should instead concentrate on reducing our dependency on cars. Only then can we truly alleviate the severity of traffic congestion.

Rather than widening roads or building more highways, we should consider reducing the number of lanes. Although counterintuitive, the concept of a “road diet” has proven effective in not only managing traffic flow but also improving overall road safety for all users.

A road diet is typically implemented by reducing the number of lanes on a road.

In areas that have adopted this approach, many two-way, four-lane roads have been transformed into two-way, three-lane roads, with the centre lane designated for turns and shared by both directions of traffic.

This change would free up space on both sides of the road, which could be used for designated bike lanes, parking spaces or, even better, a dedicated lane for micromobility vehicles.

Micromobility vehicles were banned on public roads in 2021 due to concerns over the safety of road users, and more restrictions on vehicle types followed in 2022. The ban was justifiable, as while micromobility vehicles are highly accessible, their smaller size and lack of protective requirements, such as helmets, posed a significant risk of injury on public roads.

However, such issues can be resolved by providing a special lane for micromobility vehicles. The report from the International Transport Forum (2024) found that sidewalks and traffic lanes were the least safe locations for riding micromobility vehicles while separated bike lanes proved to be the safer option, with a lower risk of injuries.

A summary of case studies in Virginia, United States, published in 2020, found a general positive impact in locations that had implemented road diets. Although the impact on traffic volume remained unclear, there was a clear reduction in vehicular accidents while cyclist and pedestrian usage notably increased.

On top of that, spillover effects, such as increased retail sales and improved housing market performance, were observed in locations that went through a road diet. Most importantly, peak travel times were slightly improved and travel speeds remained steady.



A study by KL City Hall found that motorists spend an average of 580 hours in traffic jams per year. — MASRY CHE ANI/THE SUN

An earlier study in San Jose, California, found a noticeable reduction in traffic volume and a significant reduction in traffic speed after a road diet.

Furthermore, they claimed that the reduced volume was not due to traffic being diverted to another part of the neighbourhood as the traffic volume in other streets also experienced a fall or remained flat.

Notably, the US is also one of the most car-dependent countries. While road diets are not particularly great for locations with extremely high traffic volumes such as highways, they do wonders in improving another aspect that would eventually have an impact on the traffic volumes of highways: public transport.

Solving first and last-mile problem

One common criticism of our public transport has been the first and last-mile problem – meaning how do people get to the transport hub from where they are and how do they get to their destination from the transport hub?

By creating a dedicated lane for micromobility vehicles, we can encourage their use and provide an essential transport solution for the first and last mile.

Micromobility vehicles are not the only solution for first- and last-mile issues regarding our public transport. The Selangor government is experimenting with Demand Responsive Transit (DRT). Rapid Bus Sdn Bhd is partnering with KL City Hall to expand bus lanes in Kuala Lumpur and has recently tried to launch trials on Penang Island.

If both projects are successful in achieving their objectives, they could do wonders in solving the issue. Only then can we persuade people to ditch private vehicles and start using

public transport without worrying about being unable to reach their destinations after getting off the train or bus.

Furthermore, our public transport needs to branch out to the outskirts and suburbs, providing better connectivity between these areas and the city centre without relying on private vehicles. The lack of public transport linking the inner city to the outskirts is one of the key factors contributing to the constant congestion on highways.

Apart from offering alternative modes of transport, another effective way to reduce traffic congestion is by decreasing the reliance on private vehicles. This can be achieved by ensuring that suburban areas are equipped with the necessary infrastructure.

It is important to focus on evenly developing all areas with essential services, such as schools and healthcare facilities, rather than concentrating resources on already overdeveloped locations.

In addition to promoting remote work and flexible working arrangements, these measures would effectively reduce the need for driving and help lower the cost of living for individuals.

After years of relying on the same ineffective strategies, it is time to adopt a new approach to addressing traffic congestion. We must shift our focus from simply moving more cars from one place to another and start prioritising the efficient movement of people to their destinations.

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