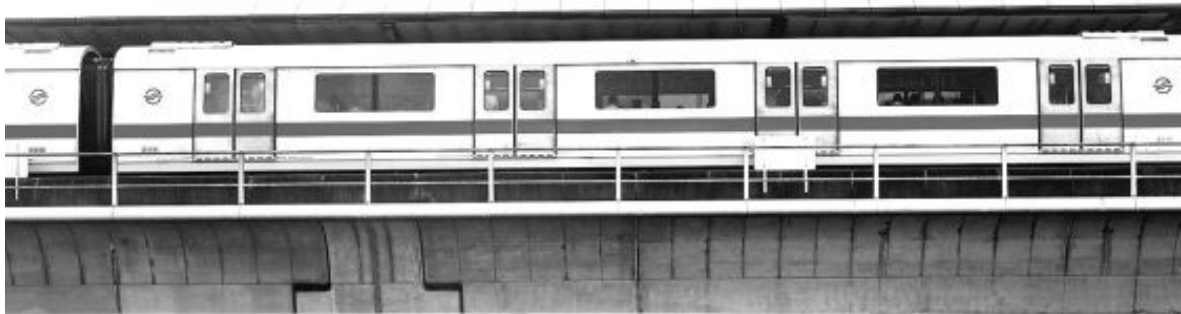




singapore

## Towards a world-class transport system



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**BY IVAN PNG - APRIL 28**

Last year, the government published the latest five-year Land Transport Masterplan, with the vision of a people-centred transport system. While the Masterplan initiatives are good, I feel that a lot more can and should be done.

In a recent study on urban mobility by the International Association of Public Transport, Singapore ranked sixth in the world, with Hong Kong in first place. Let's aim high — to provide a world-class transport system and take the top position.

An ideal public transport system provides reliable, convenient and comfortable service

at an affordable fare. Generally, it comprises two elements: (a) long- and medium-distance travel by either train or bus; and (b) last mile connection to buses and trains.

An obvious weakness in Singapore is the last mile. We can learn from Hong Kong's superb minibus service. When visiting Hong Kong, I seldom wait more than five minutes for a minibus to take me to the train station. By contrast, Singapore's Masterplan aims to reduce the wait to 10 minutes, which is still too long for many people.

Government officials might ask how we are to recruit the drivers. My answer is simple. With sufficiently good service, people will switch from taxis to minibuses. By replacing two or three taxis with one minibus, we will not only save precious labour, but also reduce congestion and emissions. From an economic and social viewpoint, the gains are obvious.

One bugbear for many commuters is the irregularity of bus service. Too often, we wait 20 minutes just to see three buses arrive within seconds of each other. A key reason is that routes are too long. On a long route, with congestion and random fluctuations in demand, it is easy for a bus to slow down, so much that the buses behind catch up to form a convoy.

Solution? Rationalise the route structure so that buses provide intermediate distance travel, while letting trains handle long distances.

## TIME FOR RADICAL RETHINK

It would help to build terminals in busy areas such as Orchard Road and the city centre. Again, we can learn from Hong Kong. Sure, the bus terminal under Exchange Square, a prime commercial property, means a huge sacrifice in retail rents. But it provides huge reliability and convenience to commuters.

The Land Transport Authority (LTA) should also tweak road design to make public transport more accessible. For instance, Orchard Road shoppers must hike several hundred metres to the other side of Orchard Boulevard to catch buses to the West and North. Why not draw an exclusive bus lane along Orchard Road allowing buses to operate in both directions?

Much more can be done to harness information technology to improve the reliability and convenience of the bus service. LTA has announced new investments in IT to enhance bus services. Provide information on bus arrivals at every bus stop, not just a select few — either through displays at the bus stop or direct to the traveller's smartphone or by SMS. Inside every bus, provide information on bus connections at the next stop, so that passengers can plan transfers smoothly without guessing.

The railways, the backbone of transport system, appear to be insufficient. We have heard of people starting their morning commute in the opposite direction of their workplace and then changing trains just to get a seat. Such behaviour is ironic but understandable. Unfortunately, shortage of capacity creates even more demand.

The rail operators are working to increase the frequency of trains. Will this be enough? And more frequent services may mean less buffer for random interruptions, such as a faulty door. Perhaps the government should look into extending trains by two carriages? Of course, this would require investment in retrofitting stations, but we should think of the long term.

Finally, how about a radical rethink of the fare system? As more and more people buy a monthly pass, do we need to make them queue up at the entrance and exit — whether at stations or on the bus — to flash their cards at the electronic reader? Why not follow the European system of requiring only travellers paying for a single ride to flash the card? Boarding and alighting from buses would be much faster, stations would be less congested, and everyone would benefit from the time saving.

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