

# Complete public transport overhaul needed

**PETALING JAYA:** Increasing bus frequency and the number of bus lanes is a commendable move, but an incomplete strategy will only lead to failure and worsen traffic congestion, say public transport experts.

The increase in bus services, they said, must be complemented by other initiatives such as road pricing – for example, charging a congestion fee on vehicles entering city centres.

Road safety expert Assoc Prof Dr Law Teik Hua from Universiti Putra Malaysia said improving bus services should be the second step of the plan to improve public transport services.

“Step one should begin with changing the public’s mindset. Make them want to use buses. We can only increase the frequency of buses if there is a demand for them, otherwise, there is no point.

“To do this, there should be road pricing where people driving to Kuala Lumpur will be required to pay extra charges, like in London and Singapore.

“When we do this, people will think twice about driving, and that’s when there will be demand for public transportation.

“We can’t simply increase the number of buses and hope it will change people’s minds, because that will never happen,” he said when contacted.

After the mindset shift, it would be viable to increase bus frequencies, he said, adding that the government should proceed with a carrot-and-stick approach, which in this case involves “discouraging” driving into urban centres, including stepping up enforcement against traffic violations.

“Giving carrots means providing subsidies to entice them to use buses, and sticks means giving harsher penalties to offenders such as those abusing bus lanes.

“The carrot-and-stick approach is difficult to implement, which is why our leaders must have the political will to do the right thing.”

On Jan 10, Transport Minister Anthony Loke said the government is looking into measures to increase daily bus ridership to 285,000 this year, from 241,000 in 2023.

He said his ministry is planning on introducing more bus lanes, aside from the current bus lanes in Kuala Lumpur’s Jalan Ampang and Jalan Genting Klang, among other measures.

Over the past few years, Loke said there has been a steady increase of between 500,000 and 600,000 new cars annually, thus contributing to the congestion.

Malaysian Public Transport Users Association president Ajit Johl suggested a gradual decrease in fuel subsidies for Malaysians.

“If we remove 20% of the fuel subsidy each year, we will all pay the market price after five years, and this will save the government RM50bil per annum. Imagine how much we can do to upgrade the entire public transport infrastructure.

“If we want to encourage people to use buses, we must give them valid reasons why they shouldn’t drive their cars all the time.

“At the same time, the process to acquire a driving licence must also be stricter because the public needs to understand that driving is a privilege, not a right.

“A plan by the government to introduce congestion fees, I believe, is in the pipeline but it needs to be hastened because there has been a surge of cars on the road,” he added.

On motorists abusing bus lanes, Johl said there must be a presence of enforcement officers, adding that the penalties should also be harsher.

“Right now, if we get fined today, we repeat the same offence tomorrow.”

A daily public transport user, Syafi Shuib, 33, said while he welcomed the government’s initiative to improve bus services, it is unlikely he would rely solely on that mode of transport.

At the moment, Syafi said he only takes the bus from his office

to get to the nearest LRT station, instead of riding it all the way home.

“People will be more attracted to use buses if there is a GPS tracker on Google Maps since it is widely used.

“There should be screens at bus stops on the estimated time of arrival (ETA) of the next bus so that users will know whether to wait or take alternative (transport).

“Currently, we don’t know if the bus will come on time, or if we would have to wait for another 30 minutes, if at all,” said the social media strategist.

Sharifah Fazleena Rahman, 27, who works in customer service at a local food and beverage firm, said she would be encouraged to take buses if the bus stop infrastructure was improved.

“I would like to take a bus straight home because it will give me more time to do other things like answering messages, emails or planning for tomorrow.

“Malaysia is hot and when it isn’t, it rains. Our bus stops are not properly shaded, so I usually end up taking Grab or a taxi to the LRT station, but that costs more.”

The *Prasarana 2023 Performance and Future Plans* report revealed that the average daily bus ridership was 473,000 in 2019, 178,000 in 2022 and 241,000 in 2023.