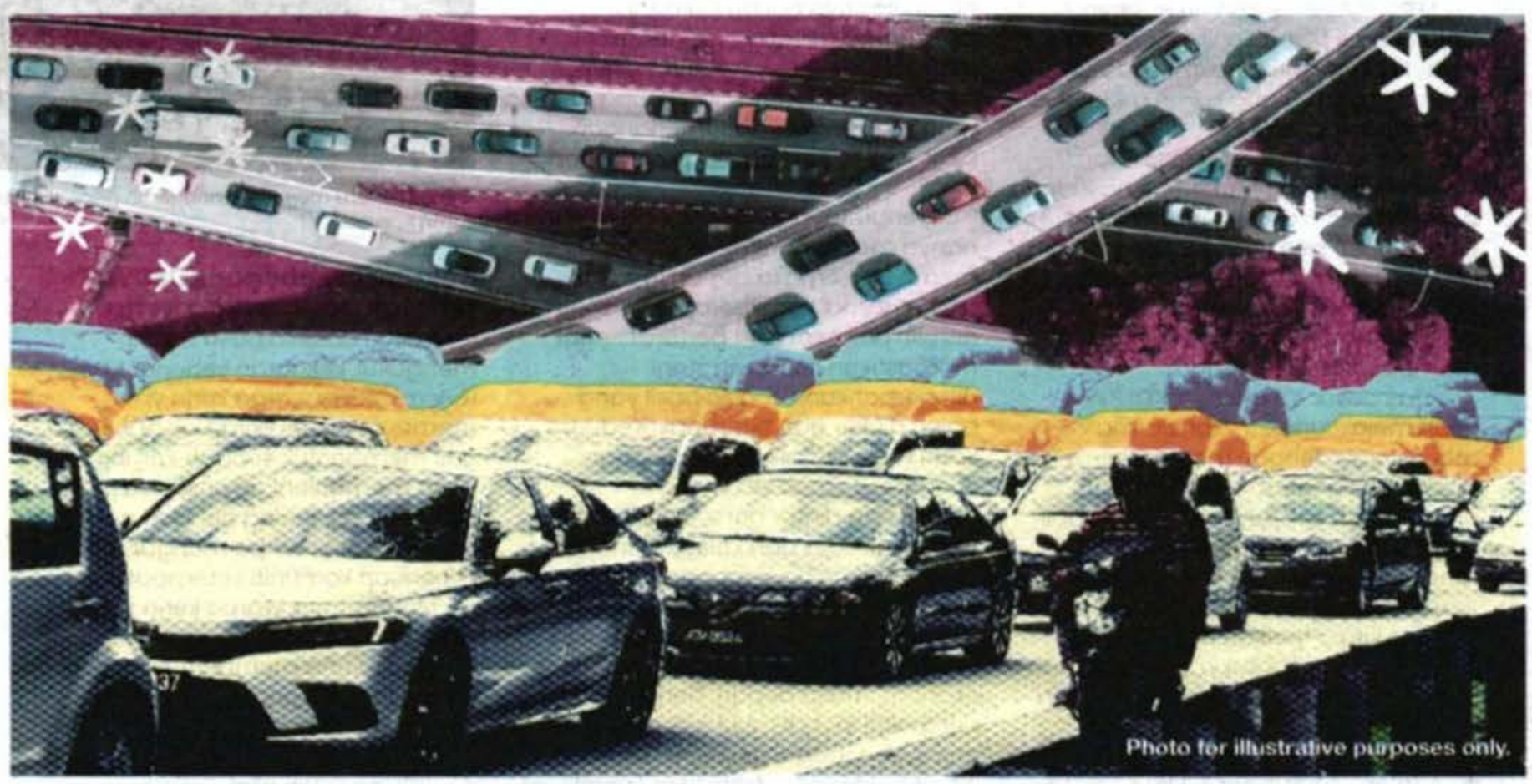
KL's traffic crisis rooted in car-centric system, transport experts say

Decades of policy choices have locked the Klang Valley into congestion, as experts say structural flaws, not just growth, are to blame

By NATASYA AZHARI
news@sinardaily.my



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Traffic congestion in the Klang Valley is not merely a byproduct of rapid urban growth, but the result of decades of structural decisions that prioritised cars over people, according to transport experts.

They argue that despite years of studies and policy discussions, core issues remain unresolved - from weak data usage and fragmented governance to an overreliance on highways.

For Universiti Putra Malaysia (UPM) Vice-Chancellor Prof Datuk Dr Ahmad Farhan Mohd Sadullah, the problem is not new and certainly not unsolvable. What is troubling, he said, is Malaysia's persistent failure to address the fundamentals.

"The congestion problem has been studied for decades, but we still lack one of the most basic planning tools - a clear understanding of how, why and when people move," he said.

At the centre of this gap is data - or the lack of it. Malaysia still does not have comprehensive origin-destination profiles for commuters in its major cities. Without this, policymakers are effectively planning in the dark.

This also extends to how commuters respond to pricing, fares and travel costs - critical inputs for managing demand between private vehicles and public transport. Without them, policy responses remain blunt and often ineffective.

But data alone does not explain the inertia. The deeper issue, Farhan said, is political will.

"There is often hesitation to make the right decisions if they are not the popular ones," he said.

For decades, policy has tilted towards private vehicle ownership. Highways expanded, car ownership became easier and cities spread outward. Public transport, meanwhile, arrived late to the system.

The turning point came with the 2008-2009 National Key Result Areas (NKRA), which accelerated urban rail development. Today, the Klang Valley's MRT and LRT networks represent visible progress.

But contradictions remain.

"While we were building rail, we were also building more highways. Highways attract more traffic," he said.

The result is a familiar paradox: increasing road capacity often generates more vehicles, not less congestion. In the Klang Valley, this has led to rising vehicle density and longer travel distances across both highways and local roads.

Compounding the issue is governance fragmentation. Transport planning is split across multiple ministries and agencies, each with different priorities - from public transport and roads to automotive policy and local infrastructure.

"There is no single coordinating body to integrate all of this. What we need is a truly integrated sustainable mobility plan," he said.

The now-defunct Land Public Transport Commission (SPAD) was once intended to play that coordinating role and its absence is still seen by some as a gap in long-term planning.

Still, Farhan stressed that the Klang Valley is not beyond fixing.

"It can be done, but it will require tough decisions, new thinking and courage." The same perspective is shared by Senior Advisor and MY Mobility Vision founder Wan Agyl Wan Hassan, who says that past decisions have shaped today's dependency on cars.

"Over several decades, we expanded highways, made cars more accessible and planned cities around distance rather than proximity. Once that happens, the car stops being a choice and becomes a necessity." The consequences are measurable: congestion levels in Kuala Lumpur exceed 40 per cent, commuters lose an estimated 80 hours annually in traffic and the economic cost is around RM20 billion a year.

"This is not just an inconvenience. It reflects a structural issue," he said.

A range of policies has reinforced this system - affordable loans, fuel subsidies and expanded vehicle supply have made car ownership the most practical option, especially when alternatives remain inconsistent.

At street level, the gap is also evident. While rail investments have improved connectivity, access to stations remains a barrier.

"Even short walks can be unsafe, uncomfortable or exposed to heat and rain. When that first and last mile fails, people choose to drive," Wan Agyl said.

This disconnect extends to urban growth patterns, where new townships continue to prioritise highway access due to speed and ease of delivery, while rail-based planning requires long-term coordination.

Even transit-oriented development (TOD), often promoted as a solution, remains uneven.

"TOD is more than building near a station. It requires walkability, mixed-use planning, reliable feeder services and reduced reliance on parking," he said.

Without these elements, developments remain effectively car-dependent despite proximity to rail.

On managing car use, Wan called for a balanced approach.

"If public transport is not yet a strong alternative, restrictions can feel unfair. People need viable options before behaviour can change," he said, while pointing to the underpricing of driving, where costs such as congestion, pollution and infrastructure use are not fully reflected in user behaviour.

Both experts agree the issue is systemic.

"Are we building transport systems for voters or for sustainability?" Farhan asked.

For Wan Agyl, the answer lies in making public transport the most practical choice - through better buses, walkable cities and coordinated planning.

There are signs of growing awareness, he said, but meaningful change will depend on consistency, coordination and political courage.