Operators face fine if trains are late

Penalty up to $1 million; maximum capacity per train also cut to 1,600

Rail operators will now have to meet a new operating standard requiring that their trains arrive at stations on time, on pain of a fine.

The Land Transport Authority (LTA), which has now checked only that the trains pull out of the depot on time, will now also monitor stations to ensure that trains run at the prescribed frequencies.

While experts welcomed this change, they raised questions on how crowdedness - another factor in the commuter's experience - was being measured.

Following an event at the Pioneer MRT station yesterday, Transport Minister Raymond Lim announced that the LTA was lowering the maximum number of passengers per train from 1,700 to 1,600.

But falling in line with this is going to be most, because train operator SMRT has said even the most crowded trains have carried only 1,400 commuters.

Mr Seah Kian Peng, a member of the Government Parliamentary Committee (GPC) for Transport, said: “It's a bit odd for them to make the standards higher than what the operators are already working at, but maybe the ministry is trying to approach this in steps and does not want it to be onerous to either operator.”

He added that it was important to review these standards regularly and “listen to the ground”.

The deputy chairman of the GPC, Mr Ong Kian Min, said “ideal capacities” were just numbers to commuters. “The capacity should not be based on technical specifications but on the practical limit of comfort for commuters. If they feel they are packed like sardines, then we should listen to that feedback,” he said.

National University of Singapore (NUS) transport researcher Lee Der-Heng agreed, saying: “It's important how the passengers view the system.

If they have to squeeze on the train to get on it, then something must be done to change the perception.”

Some commuters felt the new standard would act as a check, but were more impressed with SMRT's announcement that it would remove 44 seats from 10 trains to create more standing room.

Bank executive S. Lohith, 27, who travels from Admiralty to Novena at 8.10am on weekdays, said: “I don't really care if I get a seat - I just want to get on and get to work on time.”

While most commuters felt crowdedness was more of an issue than the waiting time between trains, the LTA is ensuring that operators run trains at the smallest possible interval the system will allow for during peak hours.

This means that between 7.45am and 8.30am, the wait should be between two and three minutes. During the lunch-hour peak, commuters at Raffles Place should see a train pull up every three to four minutes. Operators who fail to meet the LTA's time intervals will be fined between $10,000 and $1 million.

Stipulating time intervals between trains means that operators who claim they are already achieving such time intervals cannot slacken, said Mr Ong.

He said that in Moscow, which he visited recently, the trains run at one-minute intervals, which “may be something we can look into”. Over at Hong Kong, trains run at 1½-minute intervals.

SMRT's chief executive Saw Phalk Hwa said Singapore's system can handle two-minute intervals at most, but this can be shortened if its signalling system was overhauled.

NUS' Professor Lee said: “What LTA is doing is to show it's looking after passengers. That is important since it wants more people to take public transport.”

Opening on Feb 28

PIONEER and Joo Koon, the new MRT stations in the western corner of the island, will open on Feb 28. They are elevated and extend 3.6km west of Boon Lay MRT station, now the last station on the East-West line.

The 35,000 people living in Jurong West or working in Jurong Industrial Estate are expected to shave up to 15 minutes off their travelling time.

The Land Transport Authority said there is room for further extension westward from Joo Koon station.