

Sustainable transport 'needs new thinking'

Higher motoring costs, managing peak hour demand among ideas

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A PAY-AS-YOU-DRIVE tax on motorists, flexible work times that get around public transport rush hours and encouragement for car-sharing, walking and cycling.

These were among ideas floated by four experts yesterday at a seminar on sustainable urban transport policies.

A major underlying theme of the debate, held at the National University of Singapore (NUS), was whether the country is devoting too much land and resources to transport.

Panellist Anthony Chin, a transport economist at NUS, questioned land use management as the Republic's economy switches from manufacturing to high-value activities such as research and development.

Roads take up about 12 per cent of Singapore's land area, with a similar amount taken up by housing.

"But if you include the airport and port, the percentage (for transport) is much higher," Prof Chin said.

"Do we need a physical port/airport to be a maritime/aviation cluster in the future?" he asked.

The two currently impinge on space available for other uses, he said, adding that in

turn, that would drive up land prices and the cost of doing business and living in Singapore.

He said an area used up by a downtown port could instead be used for high-density mixed development.

Prof Chin also said Singapore should move away from building infrastructure to deal with transport needs at peak times – such as by encouraging working from home or flexible hours.

Professor Paul Barter of the Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy said some roads here are too wide and carparks too cheap.

While Singapore has a sound policy of restraining car ownership, he said, not enough is being done to make the city more liveable – the ultimate goal of any car-curb policy.

In fact, quite the opposite has been happening with motorists enjoying relatively high speeds while pedestrians and places take a back seat.

"Traffic congestion gets more attention than it deserves," he said.

Prof Barter said redevelopment policies had stipulated that building owners in the city must provide adequate parking, and that these carparks are "subsidised" because space used for carparks was not factored in as part of

the gross floor area calculated.

Professor A.P.G. Menon, a retired traffic planner who now teaches at the Nanyang Technological University, said: "We have provided enough for motorised traffic. It's time now to do more for non-motorised traffic."

He recalled a time when Singapore had bicycle lanes – for instance, along MacPherson Road in the 1960s – but they were converted to car lanes by the mid-1970s.

Prof Menon also pointed out that building more roads is not the answer, as new ones will quickly fill up. No city in the world has managed to build itself out of congestion, he added.

Prof Menon proposed instead the introduction of reversible traffic flow, in which more one-way lanes are provided to coincide with traffic flows in the morning and evening peak hours.

He also cited the high number of expressway inci-



Traffic on the East Coast Parkway near the Benjamin Sheares Bridge. Some experts say too much attention has been given to tackling traffic congestion and that it is time to do more for "non-motorised traffic". ST PHOTO: CAROLINE CHIA

idents that hold up traffic. For instance, in July 2008, nearly 900 breakdowns were recorded on expressways.

Mr Adrien Moulin of the Belgium-based International Association of Public Transport spoke of cities "reclaiming" urban areas, such as Tokyo revitalising space around train stations by intensive re-

development and Seoul tearing down a highway to restore a river.

Responding to a question from the floor on how Seoul's moves contrast with Singapore's plan to build a road through Bukit Brown cemetery, a site deemed by many to have natural and heritage value, Prof Barter said sacrifices would have to be made if a city wants to cater to driving.

He also felt that there could have been better public engagement ahead of the announcement.

"Government does not make enough effort in engaging," Prof Barter said. "There's a lot of secrecy in the Singapore Government."

"The cost-and-benefit assumptions were not made public... so people are naturally sceptical because they don't see the analysis."

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