

# Is electric minibus a cost-effective solution to public transport woes?



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**PUBLIC** transport provides people with economic mobility and access to employment, community resources, medical care and recreational opportunities in cities and towns across Malaysia.

Citizens and the country benefit from public transport in a variety of ways.

First and foremost, efficient and effective public mobility will bring economic benefits to citizens.

Efficient public transport would improve road congestion, thus improving commuters' productivity.

For the government, this would improve fuel usage efficiency and substantially reduce the government's cost in subsidising fuel for commuters as it would cut

down on commuters using personal vehicles.

Wider public transport use among the population would also reduce air pollution in the cities and towns.

However, the key issue is, what type of public transport could provide the most effective mode of transportation to the public, taking into account the capital expenditure and cost of operations to the system provider, and can these costs be recovered from the price of tickets and the revenue earned by the provider?

Furthermore, the effective areas of coverage by the transport system must be taken into account as each city and country has different demographics.

So, what works in Singapore, for example, may not work in Malaysia.

While we all look with admiration at the latest public transportation systems like mass rapid transit, light rail transit (LRT) and other latest technology, the cost of building and operating these systems must be taken into account, especially in the present situation of the Malaysian econ-

omy and the looming global recession.

For instance, the China Railway, which operates efficiently with huge numbers of commuters in China, has a debt of US\$900 billion.

In this case, can the Malaysian government and its government-linked companies, like Prasarana, afford to spend more billions of ringgit to expand the LRT line while it is suffering millions of losses in operating costs?

From my analysis, the most effective mode of transportation for cities and towns in Malaysia is the use of the humble minibuses of the electric kind.

Now that bus services in many Chinese cities are using electric buses, such vehicles would also be the most effective and efficient mode of public transport in Kuala Lumpur and other cities and towns.

Electric minibus services can be provided by a number of private operators as the cost of ac-

quisition and operating the buses is affordable for many small- and medium-sized companies.

The use of electric power in minibuses means huge savings in operating and maintenance costs for the operators.

In Kuala Lumpur and the surrounding areas, for example, the Kuala Lumpur City Hall could plan the routes to cover all the housing estates and commercial areas.

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With such an extensive coverage, commuters no longer need to drive to the LRT station to take a train to their destination. Some commuters will take the elec-

tric minibus to the LRT station, and others will take the electric minibus for their last-mile journey.

Once the routes are finalised, City Hall could appoint operators to cover the routes planned. This may provide new business opportunities to small- and medium-sized companies by becoming the route operators.

The rate of charges can be fixed

by City Hall to standardise the fares that commuters will pay for the service.

It would also provide an expansion to the bus-building industry as building these electric minibuses is within the capability of Malaysia's bus building companies.

The use of an electric powertrain instead of an internal combustion engine means lower cost of fuel and maintenance.

The operator could offer the most economical mode of transportation to the commuters and yet still be profitable to operate.

Most importantly, by farming out this important public service to private companies, the government would save billions of ringgit in expanding the LRT and operating it.

To reiterate, the electric minibus is the solution to economical and efficient public transport in Malaysia's major cities and towns.

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