

The Star : Feeling guilty over good news

Written by Administrator

Friday, 11 September 2009 12:41 -

30 November 2007

I AM a happy man. Almost every day, I take the Ampang-Ulu Klang Elevated Highway on my way to the so-called Golden Triangle in Kuala Lumpur, where my wife works, before proceeding to Menara Star in Petaling Jaya, via the Damansara Link of the Sprint Highway.

I've been following this routine for almost five years, as it is by far the quickest route in the morning to the workplace.

It's mostly smooth going, barring the few days when there are road mishaps along the way. And if there is some traffic congestion, it's usually due to our penchant for going, look, look, accident, accident as we slow down and crane our necks for a better view.

I pay a total of RM4 every day in toll charges levied for the two tolled highways I pass through, which is not too bad, but not cheap either.

And I was bracing for the worst, as a rate increase was on the cards or more precisely, in the concession agreements for next year.

But then Works Minister Datuk Seri S. Samy Vellu announced on Wednesday that I would not have to pay more, as the Cabinet had decided not to raise the rates on the highways concerned.

He also said there would be no toll increase for the North-South Expressway, which was more wonderful news, because I use that expressway regularly.

Therefore, I'm happy. And I bet so are tens if not hundreds of thousands of other motorists who use these routes, the Penang Bridge and the Kerinchi Link (two other stretches of road that will also see no toll increase) on a regular basis.

These are, after all, some of the most heavily used highways in the country.

Samy Vellu also announced that the toll rates for six other highways would be increased from next year.

These highways Seremban-Port Dickson Highway, Elite Highway, Butterworth-Kulim Expressway, Second Link, and two stretches that lead up to the Johor Causeway and Bukit Kayu Hitam, respectively have relatively less traffic.

Indeed, Samy Vellu said toll rates on some of them were increased because of low traffic volume.

Which is a bit perplexing, if I may digress a little. If I remember my economics lessons correctly, lower, not higher prices, have a positive effect on demand, all other things being equal.

Increasing the toll rates for, say, the Second Link, will unlikely boost traffic volume there.

Maybe what he meant was that a toll increase on these highways would affect fewer people, as these roads were not as heavily used.

That would imply that the primary concern in any decision to allow any rate increase, as per the concession agreements, is its impact on the welfare of road users.

This then makes you wonder why they didn't thrash it out when they were drawing up the agreements.

Which was probably what prompted a reporter to ask the Works Minister whether the decision not to raise toll rates on the four highways had to do with the impending general election.

He was reported to have replied that if that were the case, everything will be given free textbook Samy Vellu, as we know him.

The Cabinet's decision not to allow the toll rate increases means the respective concessionaires will have to be compensated.

For the four highways, the Government will pay a total of RM242mil in compensation. And that's just for not raising the toll rates for 2008.

In addition, the Government will also fork out next year, RM78mil for reducing the Lebuhraya Damansara-Puchong toll rate from RM2.10 to RM1.60, and RM27mil for not increasing the toll rate of the New North Klang Straits Bypass for the period from 2005 to 2007.

All in all, RM320mil will be paid out as compensation to highway concessionaires next year.

Since these are for all intents and purposes taxpayer funds we are talking about, my happiness at not having to pay a higher toll rate suddenly seems out of

The Star : Feeling guilty over good news

Written by Administrator

Friday, 11 September 2009 12:41 -

place. In fact, I'm feeling a little a bit guilty. You have here a situation where some taxpaying Malaysians are effectively subsidising the cost for others who use the highways. In other words, a number of you people out there who do not ply the highways that as I do on a daily basis are actually helping to pay for my use of the highways concerned. Is there a way out this seeming injustice? Of course. Only users should be made to bear the cost incurred for their use of the highways, and that cost includes any potential compensation that has to be paid if and when contractual rate increases are disallowed. And probably the most cost-effective, and almost certainly the fairest, manner of doing this is to allow the toll rates to rise, as per the concession agreements. If need be, regard the extra amount as *your* portion (and not that of taxpaying non-users) of the compensation that is required to be paid to the concessionaire of the highway *you* are travelling on. You use, *you* pay. It's only fair. I think that should make you feel a lot better, if not happier.

Star Online editor Raslan Sharif believes that one should neither be a burden on others nor be made to bear the burden of others.

Why Not: By RASLAN SHARIF.