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A nimble treatment of the toll situation

CREDIBILITY: Toll rates at successful highways can be retained by reducing maintenance costs

IT rained continuously in Mersing, prompting a swift exit on Monday morning. This reporter has long been working on a loose "100 must-see places before it is too late" list.

Ahead of the latest Visit Malaysia Year campaign, and given the disquiet over hikes to take effect next year, considering the arguments by the apolitical types that planning, say, a Bandung-trip would be more cost-effective under the circumstances; an investigation into prices, government communication strategies and quick road trips have been made all the more urgent.

Gathering pace in the final days of 2013 has been the toll situation.

A clarity is emerging into the government thinking on concessionaires' commitment to lenders, bondholders and shareholders versus daily expenses and the primacy of tolled roads in the crucial indicator of time spent on the roads.

Families and employers should; on paper, be happier when we move swiftly between house and the workplace. A nation is happily efficient when everybody is agile and not groaning away in yet another bottleneck.

Chances are the government is being somewhat nimble in its treatment of the toll situation.

This newspaper reported on Saturday the possibility of only non-profitable highways being considered for toll revisions after the Chinese New Year.

The list of nine such concessionaires could be further trimmed, said sources. That's a policy thinking that should gain traction and credibility.

Additionally, it is a given that the North-South Expressway will not see a toll increase anytime soon.

As for engineering and such, journalism will be sorely inadequate to recommend cost-cutting measures to highway concessionaires.

Perhaps, and this is being committed to print following a conversation with a source, toll rates at successful highways could be retained by reducing costs of maintenance, which runs into hundreds of millions of ringgit a year.

There is also this situation concerning highways with seemingly no alternatives. The old Jalan Damansara was first built in the 1980s.

A stretch of this road now runs

parallel to the Sprint Highway, a tolled road which could be avoided. A segment of Lebuhraya Damansara-Puchong (LDP) is built on the last lap of Jalan Damansara near Kepong.

In a conversation with the media on Dec 17, Minister in the Prime Minister's Department Datuk Seri Abdul Wahid Omar was reminded of the LDP situation.

The minister, who had the previous day been stunned by an online portal's misreporting of his remarks on Malaysians and toll roads, gently highlighted the investment ploughed into the old Jalan Damansara by the private sector.

The caring capacity of the old narrow road was severely restricted. Peak hour travel from the Kepong-Sungai Buloh junction to Taman Tun Dr Ismail during pre-LDP days was a protracted affair.

It is the expressed wish of all highway users that the operators of LDP and all the other successful tolled roads will keep working on improving traffic flow.

Wahid said his remarks on Dec 16 were about the government canvassing public opinion before deciding on toll rates for the new tolled roads, including an elevated link from Kinrara to Damansara which is intended partly to ease the LDP congestion.

At the session with the media, which was also attended by International Trade and Industry Minister Datuk Seri Mustapa Mohamed, the

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Power tariff hike savaged despite safety net

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media representatives expressed concern over the government stamina and desire in winning the arguments. A veteran spoke of the need for the government to exhibit a cost-reduction desire of its own.

Mustapa and Wahid acknowledged the unfortunate occurrence of the hikes happening at the same time.

The electricity tariff has been similarly savaged despite the safety net additions for the most economic of users. As with Wahid's misreporting test-case — he did not urge reluctant toll payers to seek alternatives — the tariff announcement coincides with sleepless news and commentary culture.

No one has properly figured out quite how a communications campaign should be executed. Announcements and thorough explanations could easily be missed by a big percentage of the population.

At the same time, the news cycle, especially informal ones, is being fuelled by subtle disinformation by professional propagandists.

That does not justify anything than robust communication planning and execution, waged on all fronts and incessantly.

This space shall stick with the hard facts. As for those driven by the concept that quick holidays abroad is cheaper than — this has not been clarified, is it cheaper than similarly quick domestic holidays or spending a weekend in KL or at home? — the Singapore government will not be able to dissuade its citizens from believing that it is cheaper to have their meals in Johor Baru.

By the same token, the Indonesian government is hapless in trying to stop legions of well-heeled Indonesians from seeking medical treatment in Malaysian hospitals.

Malaysians will travel in even greater numbers. By traversing the world, we shall fuse some super ideas into the workings of the economy.

By the way, that was the first ever trip to Kuala Rompin (the best draw has to be those *udang galah* outlets) and Mersing, and it was such a joy to see kids playing football in places like Endau and Tanjung Gemuk, despite the rainy spell.

There is this one last thing before VMY 2014 gets underway.

Malaysians have not figured out what constitutes brilliant weather. Rain is an inducer of sleep and inspiration but not when it pours non-stop, no?

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Highway users wish that operators of successful tolled roads will work on improving traffic flow.