

Standing room only on peak-hour trains?

Spikes in taxi fares and oil prices pushing more to public transport

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EVEN as future plans for the land transport system were being rolled out last month, commuters were setting records in rail ridership as both train operators saw unprecedented passenger trips made.

SMRT, which operates the North-South and East-West lines, saw commuters making 41,931,556 trips on its trains – a 3.17-per-cent increase from the previous high in December.

SBS Transit, which runs the North-East line, experienced a 1-per-cent increase with some 10,478,000 passenger trips. It has seen ridership climb over the last eight months, from a daily average of about 285,000 last April, to over 338,000 in January.

Analysts and industry players say the record numbers could be attributed to a few factors. One was changes in travel modes brought about by the recent spikes in taxi fares and oil prices. Then there is the growth in population and employment, as



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well as the Government's push to get more people on public transport.

Since December's taxi fare hike, Assistant Professor Terence Fan of the Singapore Management University's Lee Kong Chian School of Business has noticed more empty taxis cruising or waiting around for passengers during evening peak hours. "That was unheard of before," he said. "There must be more people shifting to the MRT."

Despite the record figures, both rail operators told TODAY their trains were still experiencing excess capacity, especially after they increased train frequencies from Feb 4.

SMRT said that since it added 83 train trips, the average train load during peak

hours is about 1,200 passengers now – down from 1,300 to 1,400 passengers previously. The company's trains can carry a maximum of 1,800 passengers.

For SBS Transit, maximum loads for their southbound (towards Harbourfront station) and northbound (Punggol) services are about 1,200 and 900 passengers respectively, during the morning peaks.

In the evenings, passenger loads fall to about 1,000 for a northbound and less than 500 for a southbound train. Its trains can carry up to 1,500 passengers.

Both operators said they would monitor their train loads and increase the number of train runs when necessary. National

University of Singapore transport researcher Han Songguang, for one, expects train ridership to grow further due to changes in car ownership policies and Electronic Road Pricing.

From June, basic bus services will also be allowed to duplicate sections of mature rail lines with heavy passenger loadings. While commuter Ms Loh Su Min, who takes the train from Bedok to her Raffles Place office, thinks the addition of such bus services would help ease congestion on trains, she hopes the Eastern Region Line can be completed earlier. "With buses, you never know if you will be stuck in a jam. Trains are much faster," said the administrative assistant.

The Government has plans to build the Thomson Line and the Eastern Region Line by 2018 and 2020, respectively.

Mr Cedric Foo, chairman of the Government Parliamentary Committee for Transport, said the projected growth in train, bus and vehicle traffic – from 8.9 million journeys per day now to 14.3 million in 2020 – has made it necessary for the authorities to build a "a denser grid of public transport lines" to attract more motorists to switch to public transport.

"The rail expansion forms the key plank of the strategy," said Mr Foo.