HOW IMPORTANT ARE THOSE FIVE MINUTES?

Was the Fort Canning Tunnel worth it, after all?

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HOW much is five minutes worth to me?

That was the thought running through my head as I drove through the new Fort Canning Tunnel. The actual experience of driving through it was so anti-climactic that I couldn’t help but wonder if that was it.

After all, so many Singaporeans had in a rare display of civic activism, tried so hard to stop the demolition of the National Library at Stamford Road. It is only natural to have high expectations for what it made way for. From purely anecdotal evidence, many are as disappointed as I was. This gives rise to the question: Was the tunnel worth it after all?

Last November, when asked if the cost of the tunnel was justified by its benefits, the Land Transport Authority’s (LTA) director for road development and management Yap Cheng Chwee told this newspaper: “I don’t think it is fair to use a cost-benefit analysis to analyse the project. The main aim was better utilisation and parcellation of land around the area. We found that there was a need to redirect roads in the area and the tunnel was the solution. Benefits like time savings for motorists are a result of the primary mission to utilise land better.”

I found that answer baffling then, and I remain baffled now. How does the LTA make decisions, if not through a cost-benefit analysis? Is there any other basis for decisions? Surely the LTA does not spend millions of dollars of taxpayers’ money without considering the costs and benefits of such expenditure.

For the record, I do not believe that the LTA operates like that. Even Mr Yap himself, immediately after saying that a cost-benefit analysis was unfair, alluded to the benefits of the tunnel project. So let’s put his comments aside, and consider the tunnel’s costs and benefits.

The main benefit is the reported time savings for motorists of up to five minutes, by using the tunnel. But how important is five minutes to Singaporean motorists, especially when, given the route involved, it is likely to be leisure time? After all, many motorists are willing to spend more than five minutes to take a more circuitous route, to avoid paying ERP.

Furthermore, this time saved needs to be balanced against the increased time spent by motorists turning towards Serangoon Road, who now have to navigate an additional turn and a new pedestrian crossing. I’ve also noticed that buses leaving the Capital Building bus stop now have to edge their way across two lanes to turn right before the tunnel, frequently slowing traffic along Stamford Road.

So even as motorists heading into Penang Road save time, those turning towards Serangoon Road spend more time. The other benefit cited was the freeing up of a football field-sized plot of land, now made available for use by the Singapore Management University. This is prime land, and is certainly valuable.

On the other hand, the land surrounding and above the tunnel is now unavailable for development. Furthermore, there is the $34 million spent to build the tunnel, and the ongoing maintenance costs of the tunnel. The value of the land freed up must be offset against these factors.

When the costs resulting from the tunnel are identified and totalled up, the benefits look even less impressive than they originally did. And let’s not forget the intangible and unquantifiable cost, namely the destruction of a landmark building cherished by so many Singaporeans.

Mah Bow Tan recently emphasised the importance of conserving Singapore’s heritage buildings and places in light of the plans to redevelop the city, as “these are things that we all remember and want our children to remember with us”. This is a very welcome acknowledgment of the intangible value of memories.

And despite the official stance that the National Library building had no special historical or architectural value and was not worthy of conservation, it certainly was a place that many Singaporeans remembered and were fond of, and I daresay much more so than many other officially sanctioned heritage buildings.

That being the case, and in view of Mr Yap’s comments, the public — especially those Singaporeans who had argued so passionately against the project — deserves a full and clear explanation from the LTA as to why it decided to demolish the National Library to build the tunnel, and the cost-benefit analysis undertaken by it.

The writer is a Nominated Member of Parliament and corporate counsel commenting in his personal capacity.