**ANSWER TO THE MRT SQUEEZE**

*Radical plan for parallel rail lines*  
*Extensions to Tuas, Marina South*  
*Earlier opening of two stations*

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THE problem is a familiar one: The passenger squeeze in MRT trains.

The solution is radical – at least in the Singaporean context: Build two new lines that run parallel to the present routes at a cost of $20 billion.

One will run from Marina Bay and end at Woodlands, very similar to the present North-South route adding new townships like Sin Ming, Kebug Baru, Thomson and Kim Seng. The other will mirror the eastern portion of the East-West Line, running through Tanjong Pura, Siglap, Marine Parade and Bedok South.

By 2018 and 2020, respectively, the 18-station Thomson Line and the 12-station Eastern Region Line will be up and running.

The routes of the two new underground lines caught National University of Singapore (NUS) researcher Han Songguang off-guard.

Said Mr Han: "In most cases, you wouldn't run parallel rail lines because they would be tapping into the same market."

Still, Assistant Professor Terence Fan of the Singapore Management University's (SMU) Lee Kong Chian School of Business pointed out that such a model is seen in New York, London and Hong Kong.

The two new lines are not the only changes to the rail network announced by Transport Minister Raymond Lim in part two of his big bang strategy on Friday: There will also be extensions to the existing lines to be ready by 2015. The North-South Line will be extended to Sengkang. The Circle Line will be extended to Upp Thomson, and the Thomson Line will be extended to Marangie.

The Government will also open the Thomson and West Coast stations along the Circle Line by 2012, reversing a 2003 directive to withhold their opening due to projected low activity in the vicinities.

In a nutshell, by 2020, the number of MRT stations will almost double from the existing 110 stations to 210. The rail network density – which also takes into account the Light Rapid Transit system – will thus increase from 31km per million persons to 51km per million persons.

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surpassing Tokyo and Hong Kong.

“People who live or work in the city and those who shop and find enjoyment there will be able to reach an MRT station within 400m on average, a mere five-minute walk,” said Mr Lim, who unveiled the changes at the opening of Kim Chuan Depot on Friday.

To ease congestion in the short term, the incumbent train operators will roll out an additional 93 trips per week from next month – 10 for the North East Line and 83 for the rest of the network. The extra trips will cut waiting times during the morning and evening peak hours to two minutes on average.

Explaining the rationale behind the two new MRT lines, Brigadier-General Choi Shing Kwok, Permanent Secretary (Transport), said it was based on projections that the areas will experience the densest increases in traffic volume towards the city area.

NUS’ Mr Han said: “It (extended railway network) will hopefully solve the perennial traffic congestion on the Central Expressway. That is one of the biggest issues that we have not really managed to solve yet.”

Residents living near the proposed MRT lines generally welcomed the greater accessibility — and the higher property prices they would enjoy — although some worried that this could mean fewer bus services in their estates.

Still, Member of Parliament Ong Kian Min, deputy chairman of the Government Parliamentary Committee for Transport, felt commuters and residents “have come to accept” some short-term inconveniences, including road diversions, for the “long-term good”.

While Mr Han believes the key to solving traffic congestion lies with policies on car ownership, he regards the initiatives for the bus and rail network so far as “a step in the right direction”. He expects the ERP prices to rise further to manage car demand.

Mr Han said: “The Government must realise there will be a time lag between now and the time the MRT infrastructure comes into place. There may be not so many alternatives for commuters, especially for those who stay in certain parts of Singapore.”

— WITH ADDITIONAL REPORTING BY NG JING YNG