

Train to ease the strain

I HAD to suppress an impulse to hail the new Ipoh-KL rail due on the tracks – barely three weeks from today – in a manner I may come to regret.

I was thrilled when Keretapi Tanah Melayu Bhd (KTMB) announced its new service beginning Dec 1 that I considered proclaiming it one that shall: a. shrink this compact-nation, travel wise; b. tweak and disperse population patterns thus yield us more livable cities; and c. plant in fertile minds the previously bizarre idea of cheaper houses with large gardens in, say Tapah, and commute to KL.

It is wiser for now instead to look at the realistic immediate impact of this RM10 per full-trip service touted to take just under three hours. The loop straddles 10 stations, including Tapah and connects stretches along the North-South Expressway-corridor, already a catalyst for exciting bus routes. Point-to-point connection of rail and bus links could even mean that some routes may very well be faster than air travel!

The new rail link with five trips one way and departing Ipoh at 5am should be in Sungai Buloh and Kepong Sentral, being the network's key Lembah Klang stops, at about 7.30am (guesswork).

Can it then provide the unintended relief to teeming commuters catch-



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ing the more-frequent but not-too-comfortable KTM Komuter trains to the city? A solitary train in a sea of humanity in the peak period of 7.30-9.30am will not amount to much but it guarantees a popular debut for the Ipoh-KL service.

Many would relish less of the crush associated with the KTM Komuter, which stops at the stations of Kepong, Segambut, Putra and Bank Negara as it progresses to the city centre.

KTMB is promising more delights. Five new sets of trains costing RM240 million are to join the fleet in 2010, further reducing Ipoh-KL travel to 135 minutes.

Leading cartoonist Datuk Lat, who lives in Ipoh and is a dedicated public transport man, should be beaming. Likewise cabin crew members of MAS and Air Asia who live in Ipoh, plus part-time workers and businessmen.

Will the nation be ready for daily commuting from Ipoh to KL by

2010? Passengers could start working on their laptop the moment the train leaves the Ipoh Railway Station, send out emails, make phone calls, read up all the newspapers, magazines, and books: This could well inspire the flowering of literary and artistic works.

The immediate interest shall be much more "localised", though. The spotlight will fall on areas around stations near KL. Northbound, next to Sungai Buloh is Kuala Kubu Baru where it would be interesting to screen population and employment patterns. Travel into the city from Kuala Kubu Baru will be a breeze at what, RM 3.50 per trip?

This service alone cannot conceivably spark new population patterns but it signals future trends, especially when KTM Komuter intends going right up to Tanjung Malim on the Perak-Selangor border.

It effectively means that living near stations served by both KTM Komuter and the Ipoh-KL link shall



acquire a bright new appeal. Town planners, politicians, policy activists, landscape architects should try the Ipoh-KL service and along the journey, envision new public parks and university towns on the Ipoh-KL circuit, among other advancements.

Perhaps in the next 50 years, apartments will ring around new parks in Tapah – and population

dispersal northwards shall begin in earnest. As better salaries for teachers shall inspire them more, urban parents would not mind moving out of KL to where semi-urban schools are as good.

The net effect is small town living shall gain new prominence and perspectives, while city living could be relieved of the choking, pushing and shoving that tends to raise political heat.

We can't all be prime ministers or foist our beliefs on others but we can conceive the endearing Malaysian dream. Political argument gets murkier when we neglect to intersperse it with elevating fruits of responsible politics – from better schools to greener cities, and, less crime.

Malay Mail, which is big on public transport and national argument, may want to organise a trip on the Ipoh-KL link for its writers as a means of muscle relaxant amidst the animated debate that goes on in its pages.

Rather than look at things with furrowed brows as I tend to at times, we should remind ourselves how wonderful a nation this is.

• *Rashid Yusof, on sabbatical from 24-hour journalism, is looking to dredge up a range of arguments and a smattering of ideas for the public domain.*