



Persatuan Pengguna Pulau Pinang Consumers Association of Penang

檳城消費人協會 பிளாங்கு பயனீட்டாளர் சங்கம்

10 Jalan Masjid Negeri, 11600 Pulau Pinang, Malaysia
Tel: 604-8299511 Fax: 604-8298109
email: consumerofpenang@gmail.com

Websites:
www.consumer.org.my

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Pedestrians side-lined in transportation policy ‘development’

The Consumers Association of Penang is deeply concerned that pedestrians are either side-lined in the government transportation plan or that they have been overlooked after the prioritisation of motorised vehicle use.

The situation has deteriorated over the last three decades since car ownership was encouraged with the advent of the first national car in 1985. Nationwide in 1975, 47 percent Malaysians used public transportation and 63,842 passenger cars were registered. However, by 2005 only 6 per cent Malaysians used public transport while 416,692 passenger cars were registered. The number of registered cars had increased by 6.5 times within two decades while number of bus users plummeted almost 8 times.

In Penang Island itself roads were widened to accommodate the increase and more than 12 pedestrian bridges were constructed. They are white elephants, each costing more than a million Ringgit to build.

Pedestrians have to bear the inconvenience of having to use the pedestrian bridge. Hence they prefer to dash across the road rather than using these bridges. On an annual average, 562 pedestrians – mostly the elderly and children – die trying to cross the roads in urban areas. The steps of some of these bridges are 15.24 cm (6 inches) high but others are an inch higher, making the stairs even harder to ascend or descend for a pregnant lady or a person with bad knees. Instead of having to cross about 7 metres (23 ft) on level ground, the person has to use the staircase involving gradients with between 30 to 50 steps on each side of the bridge.

In constructing pedestrian bridges, the government has conveniently forgotten about those who are physically disadvantaged. CAP proposes the installation of traffic lights with zebra crossings similar to those at Komtar are installed at all pedestrian crossings.

It is much easier for the elderly and persons with special abilities (OKU) to cross a street with traffic lights and pedestrian crossing, particularly with the help of a system such as the Green Man Plus which was implemented in Singapore.

With the system, whoever is aged 60 and above or is an OKU can apply for a smart card which is used to tap on a card reader on a traffic light pole. Once the card is verified, the system will extend the duration of the traffic light for between 3 and 13 seconds to enable them to cross the road. CCTVs can be installed at traffic junctions to discourage vehicles from beating the red light thereby endangering other road users.

Penang meanwhile needs sidewalks for pedestrian of asphalt, concrete, or firmly packed crushed aggregate and unobstructed. As it is now, many of these sidewalks are badly maintained and pose a danger to people who may trip and fall over the uneven surface. In many areas some of the monsoon drain guard rails are missing and people, especially the elderly and children, may fall into it. Vehicles that are parked on pavements or OKU dedicated parking bays should be towed away.

CAP concurs with Dr Lim Mah Hui that clamping and towing of vehicles obstructing the traffic is not to collect revenue but to instill respect and obedience to laws. However, CAP feels that the rate to unclamp a vehicle is too low and is not deterrent enough. For some, RM50 is just pittance after considering the high cost of living these days.

Inconvenience such as the process of getting back a towed car is a good deterrent. Perhaps the Penang City Council should consider making errant drivers to make payment at designated booths before the wheel of the vehicle will be unclamped.

A pedestrian path should not be obstructed by signages, street furniture or overhanging vegetation. The width of it should be based on the demand and mix of users. Many of our sidewalks flouted these rules with priority given to road widening that drastically narrowed some of the sidewalks. Pedestrians find it difficult to walk along these paths that may have trees growing where a path is and a monsoon drain beside it, thereby forcing pedestrians to walk on the road. Such problems can be found Pulau Tikus area and Jalan Masjid Negeri. The paths may also have high road curbs that are not friendly to the elderly or OKU.

Highways should be done away with because it was found that in other countries that traffic condition often remained status quo or became worse. On the contrary, as it was done in the U.S., city freeways were daringly turned into vibrant parks e.g. in Seattle, Boston, Dallas, and St. Louis. It has been so successful that Los Angeles and Chicago are also heading in that direction too.

CAP demands that pedestrians be given the priority in traffic planning because it makes no sense for pedestrians to climb stairs while vehicles use level roads.

On road widening, a quote by Walter Kulash, a traffic engineer from Florida, U.S.A., is most apt: ***“Widening roads to solve traffic congestion is like loosening your belt to cure obesity.”***

S. M. Mohamed Idris
President
Consumers Association of Penang