

Despite push for public transport, a love for cars endures

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604,633 a year ago and the peak of 607,292 in 2013 — and the lowest since the end of 2010, when the figure was 584,399. Meanwhile, public transport ridership has been growing steadily. It went up last year by 4.6 per cent to hit a record 6.65 million trips per day, and its mode share grew to 66 per cent, up from 64 per cent in 2013.

The Government has invested huge amounts of money to improve public transport as it seeks to wean Singaporeans off their cars. There will be 99 new trains by 2019 and 450 new buses by 2017 — on top of the 550 already added in recent years. By 2030, there will be new rail lines, more covered walkways and a 700km cycling network.

But as the unprecedented simultaneous breakdown of two major MRT lines earlier this month showed, much remains to be done even as policymakers taste success in getting motorists to switch to public transport.

Ms Cindy Dermawan, 39, owns a car but she takes the bus and MRT to work on weekdays — even though this means her travelling time more than doubles. To get from her home in Bishan to her workplace at Changi Business Park, she takes a bus to Bishan MRT Station, where she hops on a train towards City Hall Station. There, she switches to the East-West line and takes a train towards Expo Station. She completes the 75-minute journey by walking to her office.

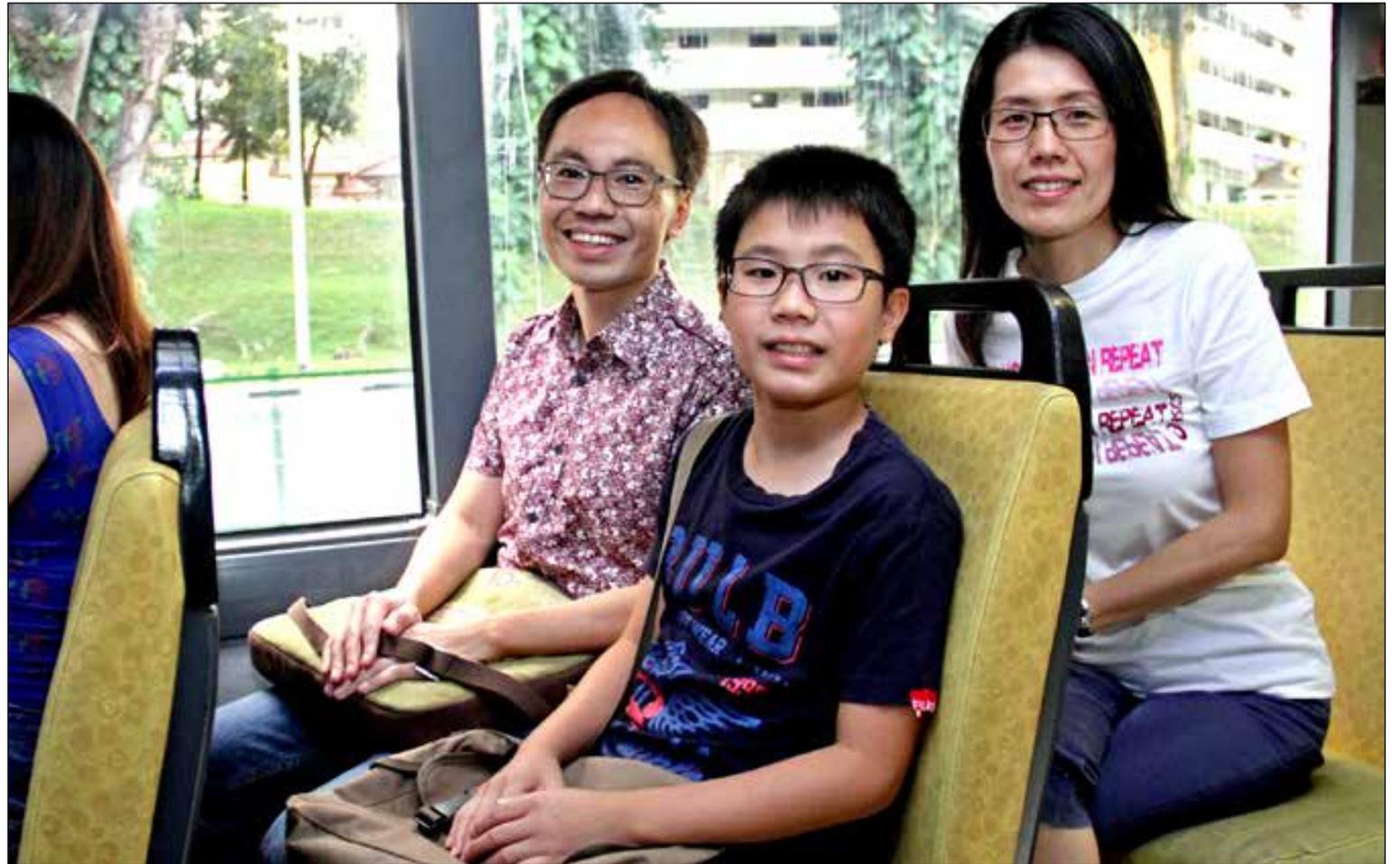
It would take her only 30 minutes to drive to work. “Public transport takes a longer time, but it’s fine because I can leave (work) earlier and still get home within the time that I want,” she said, adding that her workplace offers flexible hours. “It’s also ‘me’ time ... sitting on public transport every morning is something I enjoy — I get to do my own thing, listen to music. Going home, it also means an additional 45 minutes to one hour working on my Blackberry. If I drive, I can’t do that.”

The mother of two, who is head of talent and learning management, diversity and inclusion at Citi Singapore, said she and her children — aged six and 11 — take public transport during weekend family outings as well to places such as Orchard Road, the Botanic Gardens or Novena Square.

She estimates that she uses her car only about one-third of the time, when she takes her children to tuition classes, for example. A big part of her choice to drive less stems from the money she could save by taking public transport. Parking at Orchard Road, for example, is expensive — on top of the Electronic Road Pricing costs, she pointed out. She used to spend more than S\$100 a week on fuel and S\$12 a day on parking when she drove to work every day.

Non-constituency Member of Parliament Gerald Giam, 38, in a Facebook post last month said he had given up his car. He told TODAY that he did so after the COE for his second-hand 2005 Toyota Corolla Altis expired.

With the duration of his journeys now two to three times longer com-



The Lim family on board a public bus: Walter Lim, 44, Ethan Lim, 11, and Tina Tan, 43.
PHOTO: JASLIN GOH

pared with when he drove, Mr Giam said advance planning is essential before he and his family leave home. For instance, he has to take into account what items to take along on block visits, he said. While he used to leave boxes of materials in his car boot, he now carries just enough printed materials to distribute to residents during the visits.

To save travelling time, he makes use of mobile apps such as Google Maps and MyTransport.sg to plan his journey and gauge bus arrival times. His children, aged five and seven, like taking the bus and train, he said. Like Ms Dermawan, he also relishes the fact that he can make better use of time that would have been spent behind the wheel. “I enjoy being able to catch up on my reading while riding (on buses and trains), instead of being rather unproductive while driving,” he said.

For some, a lifestyle without a car has brought about even greater health benefits when they incorporate exercise into the travelling experience.

Mr Francis Chu, 55, traded in his four-year-old Opel Zafira a decade ago for a bicycle, after he felt his fitness deteriorate because of a lack of physical activity. The business owner, who is a permanent resident here, used to cycle regularly when he lived in the Netherlands. After he moved to Singapore in 1996, he started to drive. But dizzy spells in 2002 prompted him to exercise more, and he turned to cycling — using not one, but two bicycles — and public transport to get to work. Then, he cycled from his home on Yishun Street 81 to Khatib MRT Station, parked his bicycle there and took a train to Toa Payoh MRT Station, where he would use another bicycle to reach his workplace at Toa Payoh Lorong 1.

In 2004, he ditched his car for good. He now uses a foldable bicycle to shuttle between his Geylang East home and his office in Ubi. For longer journeys, he cycles to MRT stations and takes his bicycle onto the trains. “I feel so liberated without a car. I don’t have to worry about whether there’s easy parking. Now, wherever I want to go, I can just go,” he said.

Mr Chu, the co-founder of cycling group Love Cycling Singapore, noted the improvements across the island, such as the park connectors, that have benefited cyclists such as himself. But safety is still a consideration, he said. The authorities should create dedicated bicycle lanes on the roads without reducing the number of car lanes if they narrow some of the wider lanes, he suggested.

COE SYSTEM KEEPS DEMAND FOR CARS HIGH: ANALYST

But people like Mr Lim, Ms Dermawan, Mr Giam and Mr Chu are the exception, not the norm. Transport analysts noted that Singaporeans’ soft spot for cars is tough to eradicate. Car owners gripe that it is a nightmare manoeuvring around the public transport system with strollers, toddlers or elderly parents, the analysts added.

Overcrowding is also a deterrent, as well as the fact that the density of the MRT network is still not ideal, said Nanyang Technological University’s Assistant Professor Walter Theseira.

The analysts reiterated that there are still weaknesses in the public transportation system. Also, policies in this area are not fully aligned, and some may even appear contradictory or tentative, they said. Asst Prof Theseira

pointed out that under policies such as the COE system, cars become cheaper if demand for them drops. “If people really start giving up their cars, then (COE) prices will fall, thereby stimulating demand. So actually, it’s very hard to really make a big dent in car demand because of basic economics,” he said.

He added that major commercial developments, for example large format stores such as IKEA and entertainment enclaves including Dempsey Hill, cater largely to motorists. As a result, people will continue to consider cars as very important to meeting their lifestyle aspirations, he said.

In land-scarce Singapore, roads take up about 12 per cent of the land. Dr Alexander Erath, a transport researcher at the Singapore-ETH Future Cities Laboratory, felt decision makers in Singapore “have so far been reluctant to take away space” from motorists and give it to pedestrians and cyclists. “If you do so, there will be moaning by the motorists ... But experience shows that people will adapt (their) behaviour, car traffic will evaporate and streets that not only serve the needs of motorists but also pedestrians, cyclists and public transport will ultimately lead to a much more liveable city,” he said.

Agreeing, Mr Philippe Crist, an economist at the International Transport Forum under the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, said the greatest factor in the high demand for cars here “may be the fact that those in charge of making decisions simply do not believe that there is an alternative to having a high reliance on car travel for the city to function”. He noted that such a sentiment is not unique to Singapore.



VIDEO PUBLIC TRANSPORT VS DRIVING IN SINGAPORE

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