Congestion

By Scott Younger

Thirty years ago I arrived in Bangkok to take up a post with responsibility for the technical aspects of the construction of 4 major provincial highways in Thailand. I have been in the Far East ever since, a child of the east, brought up in the west and drawn back to the orient!

We lived in Bangkok, a thriving, bustling city, albeit prone to political coups, but frustratingly traffic congested and polluted. A progress meeting at the Department of Highways from the office needed careful planning to minimize the time spent sitting in traffic. And then, in the early 1980s, the first intra-city toll road was built, a multi-lane elevated expressway from the centre of the city to the port; this was the start. Since then, other essential elevated highways have been built; an elevated light rail and underground MRT constructed that are now in operation and well-patronized, and moving around Bangkok is much less arduous than it used to be.

Bangkok is a mega-city, although smaller than Jakarta, which is destined, with its satellite towns, to become one of the largest urban sprawls in the world with over 30 million people by the early 2020s. It suffers the same legacy as Bangkok, a primary and tertiary network, with an inadequate intermediary collection system, and a totally insufficient land area given over to roads. A properly functioning major city needs a minimum land area for roads in excess of 15% to ensure good traffic flow. Jakarta has not much more than half of this land take, and little or no opportunity to improve. The pace of development has far outmatched the thinking of earlier strategic planners, although Jakarta is not the only city to suffer from this; it is one among many. So when you cannot build at ground zero, you have to go up or below, as Governor Fauzi has recognised and as many other cities have put into effect.

We need flyovers, the monorail, the MRT, the newly announced rail circle line - although its launch has been inept and some private sector involvement, even only at consultancy level, would help - and more extensive use of public rights-of-way, for instance along those of railway lines. The old triple-decker concept had some merit. We need an upgraded and extended suburban commuter rail service - a long overdue multi-billion dollar investment to provide public service linkage to the rapidly expanding suburbs.

Many column inches are expended both for and against the busway. The initial line down Sudirman works because, with the replacement of the lane initially removed, it no longer takes away capacity from the other vehicles although, as elsewhere, there are not enough

buses. In the heat of the day, one is lucky to get on the first bus that comes along. Some of the other busway routes have not been properly thought through and are causing chaos in parts of the city; the principles of road capacity have been set aside.

Britain has a well-developed rail network and many provincial airports. Many journeys can be and are taken by either public or private transport, but the undisputable fact remains that more than 90% of journeys are made in motor vehicles and, even if the future sees a change in the means of propulsion, roads will be the routes followed. Stopping the construction of roads does not prevent people from buying cars or motorcycles and using them.

And there is a trade off. The pollution arising from traffic jams is not only unhealthy it is also wasteful and costly. It is not difficult to assess that the loss through idling engines in Jakarta's traffic jams alone costs the country over US$1 billion per year, never mind the difficult-to-assess loss in productivity due to pollution related ill-health.

In 2001, a transport masterplan for Jakarta and its satellite towns was drawn up. While delays in implementation highlight a number of changes, in general the city has to get on with it - everything! - and encourage the use of private sector funding, where appropriate, to assist overstretched government budgets. More power to the Governor's elbow!