

“Averting ‘Carmageddon’ Through Reform? An Eco-Systemic Analysis of Traffic  
Congestion and Transportation Policy Gridlock in Metro Manila”

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“London, the crouching monster, like every other monster has to breathe, and breathe it does in its own obscure, malignant ways. Its vital oxygen is composed of suburban working men and women of all kinds, who every morning are sucked up through an infinitely complicated respiratory apparatus of trains and termini into the mighty congested lungs, held there for a number of hours, and then, in the evening, exhaled violently through the same channels. The men and women imagine they are going into London and coming out again more or less of their own free will, but the crouching monster sees all and knows better.”

Patrick Hamilton, *The Slaves of Solitude* (1947)

Over the course of the past decade, a steadily growing stream of critical commentary and prescriptive analysis has focused on the mounting problems associated with traffic congestion and transport infrastructure gridlock in Metro Manila and the neighboring provinces of the National Capital Region of the Philippines. Columnists and other critical commentators have emphasized the failings and foibles of politicians and policy-makers, whose incapacity for decisive, effective action and susceptibility to corruption have been cited as explanations for traffic congestion so heavy as to lose commuters 16 full days each year and cost 3.5 billion Philippine pesos (nearly US\$69 million) per day for the economy as a whole. Government policymakers, urban planners, transport specialists, and other consultants and policy advocates have concentrated on putatively technical fixes like the Public Utility Vehicle Modernization Program (PUVMP), new provincial bus terminals, high-tech schemes for ‘smart’ traffic management, and proposals for a Bus Rapid Transit System (BRT). The problems are understood to be ‘political’ and the solutions to be ‘technical’, with plenty of finger-pointing at those responsible for the problems, on the one hand, and Power-pointing by those responsible for the solutions, on the other. But meanwhile, a decade has elapsed and the problems have persisted if not worsened over time.

Against this backdrop, this essay provides a critical alternative – ecological and systemic – account of traffic congestion and transportation infrastructure gridlock in Metro Manila and its suburban hinterlands. This account draws on a rich and sophisticated body of scholarly literature which shows how transportation systems and traffic patterns are intimately and intricately interwoven with land use patterns, property taxes, and commercial retail and real-estate ‘development’, and how infrastructure investments in highways and roads, macro-economic trends, and micro-financial incentives combine to determine levels of motorization (i.e. purchase and use of automobiles and/or motorcycles) vis-à-vis reliance on various forms of public transportation. The management of urban transportation systems and traffic flows through public investment, regulation, and planning, scholars have shown, is also profoundly shaped by the configurations and capacities of institutions of governance and by competition and contestation in the realm of politics.



### The Eco-System

Viewed from this perspective, transportation and traffic in Metro Manila can be understood to share many of the properties of eco-systems, such as complex hydraulic eco-systems like river deltas with their ever-shifting currents and flows along myriad channels of motion and activity. Like such eco-systems, Metro Manila transportation and traffic is populated by a multitude of different ‘species’: buses grazing for passengers like herds of elephants along major thoroughways of the metropolis, Metro Rail Transit (MRT) and Light Rail Transit (LRT) trains slithering in serpentine fashion along Epifanio de los Santos Avenue (EDSA) and Taft Avenue, motorcycle taxi drivers darting after their prey like schools of piranhas through the crowded coral reefs of the city’s streets, cars plodding along like hippos and jeepneys surfacing like crocodiles in the mangrove swamps of urban congestion, pedestrians ambling like colonies of penguins towards jeepney, bus, and MRT/LRT terminals, and, from a bird’s eye view, streams of commuters slowly flowing, like upstream-bound schools of salmon, through the waterways of the metropolis. Like their metaphorical river delta counterparts, these different species of urban transportation coexist, combine in complex forms of co-dependency, and compete for scarce resources – e.g. passengers and space – on the roads and streets of Metro Manila and its suburban hinterlands.

Like such a unified, if densely and multifariously populated, eco-system, moreover, transportation and traffic in Metro Manila and its suburban hinterlands is situated within a broader macro-ecological context and susceptible to various forms of what we might term environmental change. For example, with demographic and economic growth over the years has come motorization, automobile sales averaging more than 400,000 per annum across the Philippines by the 2010s, with the increasing flows of commuters accompanied by a rising tide of privately owned and occupied cars filling the urban and suburban roadways of the country’s metropolises and the neighbouring provinces in their immediate hinterlands. Meanwhile, the multiplicity of so-called veto players within the highly fragmented and often factionalized institutional arrangements for public investment and regulation in transportation in the Philippines has made for repeated policy logjams and derailments, producing recurring spikes in congestion and diversions of traffic flows into new patterns of circulation. With the political earthquakes of the 2010 and 2016 presidential elections, moreover, have come aftershocks with palpable consequences for Metro Manila’s transportation system: dramatic fluctuations in the fortunes of various road construction projects, in the regularity, reliability, and capacity of MRT service along EDSA, in the pace of new LRT and MRT rail extension, and in policies and practices regarding buses, jeepneys, motorcycles, and other vehicles. With the onset of the COVID-19 crisis and the imposition of an Enhanced Community Quarantine (ECQ) across Luzon in mid-March 2020, traffic flows across Metro Manila dramatically thinned, however temporarily, as lockdown at home replaced gridlock on the roads and streets of the National Capital Region.





As with river delta eco-systems, the fate of one species is intimately intertwined with that of another, not only through the intermodality of transportation, but also through competition for grazing space and the sustenance provided by passengers. Delays and derailments shift LRT and/or MRT passengers onto buses and jeepneys; private cars crowd out public utility vehicles on the roads. Overcrowding on the buses and rail lines reinforces prejudices against public transportation and preferences for private cars among those who can afford them, reproducing gridlock on the roads. As with a hydraulic system, blockages along existing channels of movement produce surging flows and floods along others, and the creation of new throughways may exacerbate rather than alleviate traffic congestion, by increasing the volume rather than the velocity of circulation.

This eco-system is embedded within the broader environment of oligarchical democracy in the Philippines. On the one hand, the urban transportation system and the problems of traffic congestion must be understood in terms of the natural tendencies towards monopoly and oligopoly inherent in the transport sector, the cartel-like structures governing private transport operations and infrastructure investment, the interlocking directorate of business and banking interests benefiting from over-reliance on private automobiles, and the accumulated impact of decades of systematic underinvestment in public transportation alongside effective subsidizing of automobile traffic through road and highway construction in and around Metro Manila and across the country. This system has served the interests not only of the diversified local conglomerates which dominate the commanding heights of the Philippine economy but also the foreign (especially Japanese) producers of the automobiles (and, to a much lesser extent, the motorcycles) which clog the streets and roads of the National Capital Region.

On the other hand, Metro Manila's urban transportation system and its problems of traffic congestion must also be understood in terms of the separation, division, and decentralization of government powers and prerogatives in the Philippines, the institutional weakness of the Department of Transportation (DOTr), the multiplicity of national and local government agencies involved in regulating transport and traffic, and the related difficulties of achieving and maintaining clarity, coherence, consistency, and coordination in government policies related to urban transport and traffic. Traffic circulation – and congestion – in Metro Manila and other major cities in the Philippines produces not only regular flows of monopoly rents accruing to the private holders of various transport franchises and concessions, but also steady streams of petty protection rents extorted by officials in the diverse regulatory and law-enforcement agencies of the national government and local government units in the national capital region and beyond. The Land Transportation Franchising and Regulatory Board (LTFRB) and the Land Transportation Office (LTO) operate as protection rackets rather than as government providers of public regulation.

At the same time, however, the eco-system of urban transportation and traffic in Metro Manila and other major Philippine cities is also embedded within processes of demographic, economic, political, social, and technological 'climate change'. The economic and political costs of increasing traffic congestion have stimulated unprecedented pressures for public

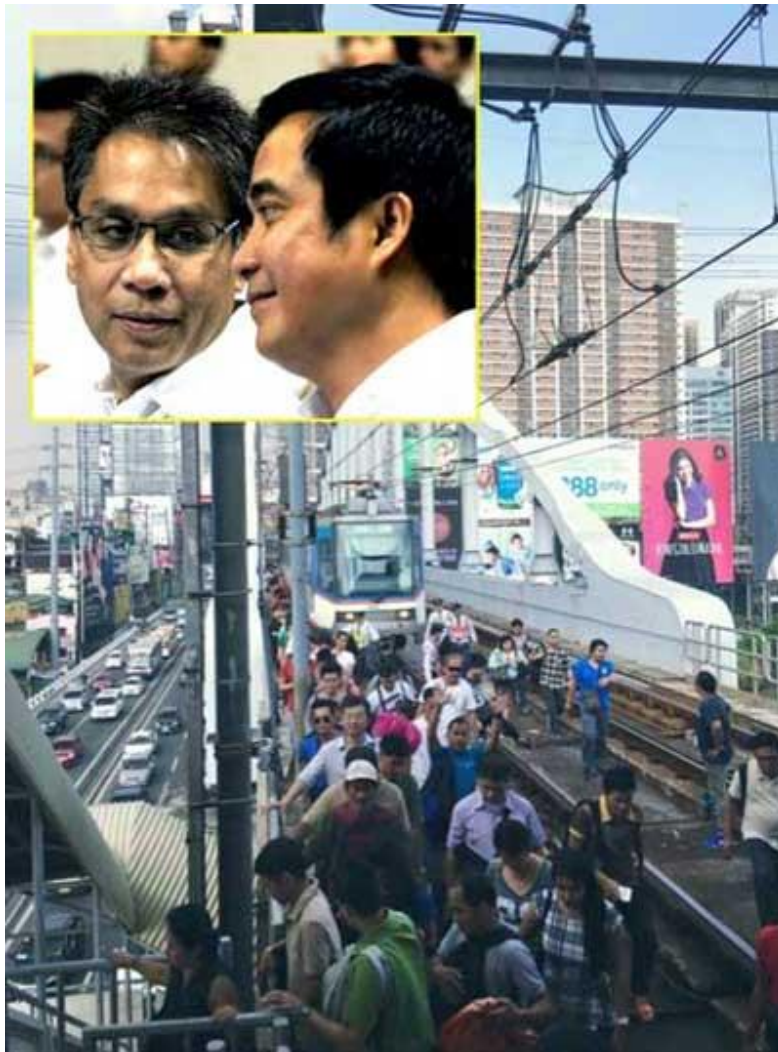
investment in urban – above-ground and underground – rail systems in Metro Manila, private entrepreneurial experimentation with diverse new forms of privately provided ‘public’ transport (P2P, UV Express, and Transportation Network Vehicle Services (TNVS) like Grab and Angkas), the initiation – if not yet effective implementation – of a Public Utility Vehicle Modernization Program (PUVMP), and consideration of – if not yet full commitment to – new schemes for buses in Metro Manila, including Bus Rapid Transit (BRT) lines on Quezon Avenue and EDSA. Beyond the objective realities – and costs – of increasing traffic congestion in Metro Manila and beyond, the subjective conditions of public opinion have generated unprecedented levels of media coverage, popular interest, and political debate focused on urban traffic problems and transportation policies in the Philippines.

Viewed within the context of the eco-system of urban transportation and traffic in Metro Manila and its hinterlands, and the ever-shifting demographic, economic, social, political, and technological environment in which this eco-system is embedded, how can we understand the prospects for policy reforms which promise to ease, expedite, and enhance mobility in the National Capital Region and beyond? If urban transportation/traffic operates as a system, what kind of systemic change is possible? A brief examination of several urban transport reform initiatives – ranging from proposals for a Bus Rapid Transit System (BRT) to the legalization of motorcycle taxis to the improvement of pedestrian walkways and introduction of bicycle lanes to the Public Utility Vehicle Modernization Program (PUVMP) – may help to show the descriptive validity and analytical value of the ecological/systemic approach to understanding traffic congestion in Metro Manila sketched above.

### Transport Reform Advocacy Groups: A New Species in the Ecosystem?

Here one important recent development over the past decade has been the introduction of a new species – the transport reform advocacy group – to the eco-system of transportation and traffic in Metro Manila and its suburban hinterlands. This emergence and evolution of this new species can be considered a natural outgrowth or by-product of the continuing expansion and upgrade of the transportation system of the National Capital Region and the resultant proliferation of new transportation and infrastructure projects as well as real-estate development schemes. These trends, after all, have expanded and enhanced the career opportunities, educational qualifications, and associational and networking activities of a growing community of transport and urban planning specialists whose credentials, creative design skills and technical expertise are needed for ensuring government approval, financing, and implementation of the myriad ongoing and impending projects transforming the urban and suburban landscape and its transportation system. Against this backdrop, the perhaps inevitable emergence of transport reform advocacy groups like Alt-Mobility, the Inclusive Mobility Network, Komyut, Sakay.ph and Move Metro Manila over the past few years has helped to amplify the voice and visibility of transportation experts and other public advocates for transport policy reform in the media, on social media, and in dialogues with members of Congress and policy-makers in the Department of Transportation (DOTr) and other local and national government agencies.





“Mar” Roxas and “Jun” Abaya, former DOTC Secretaries (2010-2016) as depicted over a photograph of one of the repeated MRT-3 derailments occurring during their terms in office.

To date, the collective voice of commuters in and around Metro Manila has only been exercised through the aggregation of votes in elections, in a diffuse but perhaps increasingly decisive fashion. Here the 2016 presidential election was notable for results in which former Senator Manuel “Mar” Roxas won a mere 14% of the vote in Metro Manila (as against Duterte’s 44% and Senator Grace Poe’s 21%) despite support from the incumbent administration’s machinery and the formal endorsement of key city mayors in the metropolis. Roxas’s poor showing may have reflected the backdrop of scandals, controversies, and widespread public perceptions implicating him – as former Department of Transportation and Communications (DOTC) Secretary – in the deepening problems with the MRT-3 and increasing traffic congestion in the National Capital Region over the years leading up to the May 2016 election. But even this kind of collective commuter voice has remained restricted to retrospective attribution of blame for past policy mistakes and limited in terms of effective input and influence with regard to transport policy decision-making moving forward.

Against this backdrop, it might be hoped that the emergence, increasing visibility, and expanding voice of advocacy groups promoting urban transport reform could affect the existing eco-system of transportation and traffic in Metro Manila and its hinterlands in a systemic fashion. Effective advocacy by transport experts could conceivably amplify the voice of Metro Manila’s commuters and articulate expert opinion and advice, thus increasing both the sense of urgency and the effectiveness of government policymaking. Indeed, some transport reform advocates have achieved considerable access, visibility, and influence in discussions and debates about transportation and traffic in the media, in Congress, and within the DOTr. This development could play a role in catalyzing a systemic upgrade in the political and policy-making environment in which Metro Manila’s transportation system and traffic congestion problems are embedded, helping to unpack problems, unlock policy gridlocks, and unveil innovative and effective policy solutions over the months and years ahead.

How might such a holistic, environmental upgrade enable and impel concrete policy reforms and systemic change in Metro Manila’s transportation system? To date, transport reform advocates have mixed insider access and lobbying efforts with an increasingly visible and vocal media presence in the realm of public opinion and policy debate. On both fronts there is some evidence of progress.

But there remains a distinct possibility that the diversity of advocates, activities, points of access, and issues will enable the absorption of this new species – the transport reform advocacy group – into the pre-existing, if evolving, eco-system of urban transportation in Metro Manila and its hinterlands without effecting systemic transformation. As scholars of transportation policies in other contexts have observed, expert advice and so-called evidence-based policymaking only produce systemic transformation through effective negotiation of the political process. Rather than operating as effective log drivers untangling logjams, today’s new transport reform advocates may end up being enlisted in diverse ancillary roles within the multi-stranded tributaries of urban transportation policy-making – i.e. as consultants and junior government officials – and becoming ensnarled within policy logjams themselves. To



understand the actual impact of reform advocacy groups on the eco-system of urban transport in and around Metro Manila, a close analysis of recent reform advocacy campaigns is in order.

### A Bus Rapid Transit (BRT) System?

One example of urban transport reform advocacy has been the promotion of a Bus Rapid Transit (BRT) system in Metro Manila, with detailed plans drawn up for BRT lines on the major thoroughfares of EDSA and Quezon Avenue. Here it is worth noting that proposals for a BRT system are fully in line with a consensus among urban transport experts and an established body of evidence as to the benefits of such a reform. A BRT system with fixed stations, timetables, and automated fares would rationalize and regularize bus operations in ways which would reduce the time, space, costs, and inconveniences and discomforts associated with unregulated competition for passengers. Instead of bus drivers lurching across lanes and lingering along the road to maximize passengers and fares as incentivized by the ‘boundary’ system, the BRT would restrict bus drivers to a single lane, a fixed schedule, and an hourly wage, thus ensuring regularity, reliability, and rapidity of bus travel for passengers. Objections to BRT proposals have remained very narrowly focused on possible technical glitches rather than on the BRT concept per se. As reforms go, this one is certainly technically sound and amply worth advocating, insofar as the demonstrably positive – indeed arguably transformative – impact on major conurbations in other developing countries suggests the possibility of a meaningful impact on transportation patterns and traffic flows in Metro Manila.

But urban transport reform advocacy groups’ efforts to promote a BRT system in Metro Manila have run up against a set of stubborn political obstacles. To date the DOTr has been strikingly ambivalent and ambiguous in terms of its actual support for BRT projects, despite the formal approval of the BRT scheme by the National Economic and Development Authority (NEDA) and the availability – and actual allocation – of funding from the national government and overseas development agencies. The Department’s stance on the BRT issue has been interpreted by observers as reflecting the political toxicity of the BRT brand in terms of its association with former Cebu City Mayor Tomas ‘Tommy’ Osmeña (an opponent of President Duterte) as well as the personal skepticism of DOTr Secretary Tugade with regard to the actual impact and potential effectiveness of a BRT system for reducing traffic congestion.

But DOTr’s evident unwillingness to implement a BRT system can also be understood in the context of the broader urban transportation eco-system and in particular the forms of symbiosis and synergy observable between the two major BRT projects slated for Metro Manila on the one hand, and light rail transit lines on the other. Here it is worth noting perceptions of rivalry – rather than complementarity – between the MRT-3 line and the proposed BRT line along EDSA, as well as potential competition over both space and passengers between a BRT line and a proposed LRT line along Quezon Avenue. Such perceptions are especially significant insofar as they may prejudice powerful interests invested in light rail projects in Metro Manila and pit them against BRT projects if not openly in the

public realm then behind the scenes at DOTr and in Congress. The San Miguel Corporation's unsolicited proposal for a new elevated toll road on EDSA may also impact on the prospects for a BRT line along the same major thoroughfare, especially if the proposal includes BRT lanes in its design.

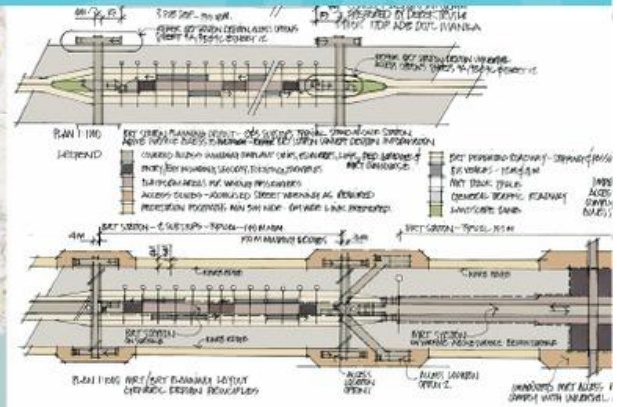


## Metro Manila Bus Rapid Transit Line 2 (EDSA BRT)

DRAFT, 19 July 2015



广州市现代快速公交  
和可持续交通研究所  
Institute for Transportation  
& Development Policy



More generally, the prospects for the development of a broader BRT system must be seen as intimately intertwined with – and impeded by – the strikingly slow evolution of light transit (and subway) lines across Metro Manila. On EDSA, the MRT-3 line has remained plagued by recurring accidents and reduced services related to protracted technical and legal difficulties with the renewal of its stock of trains. The future of the MRT-3 is also unclear, as seen in the appearance and disappearance of a string of proposals for a new operator to replace the existing partnership between the DOTr and a consortium of business interests, which is due to expire by 2025. Beyond EDSA, various projects for new LRT and MRT lines and line extensions have likewise proceeded at a snail's pace, for reasons which remain less than fully clear. Perhaps, as is often suggested, these projects have experienced delays and other difficulties simply due to Right Of Way (ROW) issues, and the owner-operators of these concessions are genuinely keen to move forward with the construction and opening of new lines but thwarted by local residents, their legal and political representatives, and red tape in the government bureaucracy and restraining orders issued by the courts. But perhaps these light rail transit line projects have also been delayed for other reasons, such as the greater advantages accruing to the operators if they defer construction until market conditions – and properly synchronized intermodal transport linkages – guarantee more reliable returns on their investments.

After all, these rail interests include such leading diversified conglomerates as the Ayala Corporation and the Metro Pacific Group of companies, whose interests in major public utilities (i.e. electricity and water), real-estate holdings, retail outlets, and highway toll concessions may conflict with speedier progress on the extension of Metro Manila's light rail transit system and, all the more so, with the establishment of a BRT system for the National Capital Region. Through cartelized ownership or operation of the key arteries of Metro Manila – its toll roads and light transit lines, its electricity grid and water system, and its telecommunications infrastructure – these conglomerates extract multiple daily 'rents' from the residents and commuters of the National Capital Region. Within this broader context, perhaps a BRT system would only work if it too were to operate as yet another private monopoly concession rather than a public service.

### Liberalization and Deregulation?

Alongside a BRT system, urban transport reform advocacy groups have also rallied behind an additional set of policy reforms involving the liberalization, deregulation, and/or legalization of various other forms of vehicular traffic providing public transport on the streets and roads of Metro Manila. Such options include the lifting of number coding restrictions for public utility vehicles imposed by the Metro Manila Development Authority (MMDA) since 1995, the easing of barriers to entry into the Premium P2P (Point-to-Point) Bus Service market in and around Metro Manila, and the legalization of motorcycle taxis in the National Capital Region. Each one of these reforms has been under consideration by the DOTr and other government agencies responsible for overseeing transport and traffic. But each one of these reforms has encountered obstacles to introduction and implementation.


In the case of MMDA's number coding restrictions for buses and jeepneys, for example, urban transport reform advocates have once again made a strong case for a seemingly self-evidently sensible reform. Such restrictions – keeping vehicles off the roads one day a week as per a rota determined by their license plate numbers – are assumed to have contributed to a 20% reduction of the number of jeepneys and buses on the roads and streets of the National Capital Region. This reduction, it is further argued, has led to shortages of public utility vehicles, queueing at jeepney and bus terminals, long curb-side waits for passengers, and thus needless crowding in transport chokepoints as well as protracted delays for commuters unable to begin their already slow-moving daily journeys in a timely fashion. These restrictions have further contributed to the conditions encouraging purchase and use of private automobiles or motorcycles rather than reliance on public transportation, thus exacerbating the underlying pattern of excessive private vehicular traffic which causes traffic congestion in and around Metro Manila. There appears to be some empirical evidence in support of this understanding of the problem as well as an intuitive supply-and-demand logic to the proposed solution.

That said, some fundamental puzzles have remained as to the current system of number coding in terms of how it actually operates, the interests that it serves, and the obstacles it throws in the path of effective reform advocacy. For example, if the current system is so inefficient and needlessly idles hundreds if not thousands of jeepneys and buses every day of the working week, then why do some other studies report low levels of average passenger occupancy/use of buses and jeepneys during many hours of the day? If the current system is so clearly disadvantageous to owners of jeepneys and buses, then why have they not clamored for reform and removal of the number coding restrictions for public utility vehicles over the years, and why are they so remarkably inactive on this front today? If the current system is so obviously flawed and deleterious in its impact, then why have reform advocates encountered such a curious mixture of apparent acknowledgement of the merits of reform on the one hand, and persistent lack of interest in implementing reform on the other? Why has the call for the lifting of number coding for buses and jeepneys encountered little in the way of open defence of the current system but also little in the way of overt opposition to it as well?

Perhaps some answers to these puzzling questions might lie in a closer analysis of how the number coding restrictions on public utility vehicles actually operate, the interests which these restrictions serve, and the actual impact they have on public utility vehicle traffic in Metro Manila and its suburban hinterlands. Here it might be worth considering the possibility that jeepney and bus owners and operators have made special arrangements with the Land Transportation Office (LTO) and/or the Land Transportation Franchising and Regulatory Board (LTFRB) which allow them to sidestep number coding restrictions. Here it might also be worth considering the extent of the MMDA's reliance on the official and unofficial revenues collected through the enforcement of the number coding restrictions on jeepneys and buses. Finally, it might be further worth considering the possibility that the actual franchising system – and the number coding restriction scheme – operates according to a logic neither entirely unrelated to, nor wholly identical with, the official rules and regulations imposed and enforced – or at least in principle enforceable – by the MMDA and other government agencies. In other words, a secondary market in license plate numbers, surreptitious subcontracting in bus and



jeepney franchise operations (the so-called *kabit* – i.e. mistress – system), and ‘protection fee’ payments to MMDA and other enforcement officers may well be at work, as knowledgeable insiders are quick to suggest.



# What You Should Know About NUMBER CODING

<b>MONDAY</b> 1 - 2	<b>TUESDAY</b> 3 - 4	<b>WEDNESDAY</b> 5 - 6	<b>THURSDAY</b> 7 - 8	<b>FRIDAY</b> 9 - 0
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**7AM-8PM**  
NO WINDOW HOURS


**AREAS**

**CALOOCAN**  
**LAS PIÑAS**  
**PASAY**  
*EXCEPT*  
MIA ROAD  
DOMESTIC ROAD  
AIRPORT ROAD  
SALES ROAD  
PORTIONS OF BUENDIA

**QUEZON CITY**  
**RADIAL ROADS**  
R1- Roxas Blvd  
R2- Taft Avenue  
R3- SSH  
R5- Ortigas Ave  
R6- Aurora Blvd/ R. Magsaysay  
R7- España, Quezon Ave. & Commonwealth Ave  
R8- A. Bonifacio  
R9- Rizal Ave  
R10- Northern Coastal

**CIRCUMFERENTIAL ROADS**  
C1-CM Recto Ave  
C2- AH Lacson Ave, Quirino Ave  
C3- G. Araneta, Sgt. Rivera  
C4- EDSA  
C5- CP Garcia Ave  
C6

**MAJOR ROADS**  
A. Mabini St. | Alabang-Zapote Rd | McArthur Highway | Marcos Highway




**MAKATI**  
**PARAÑAQUE**  
**PASIG**  
**MALABON**  
**SAN JUAN**  
**MANILA**  
**VALENZUELA**

**NO CODING**

**NAVOTAS**  
**PATEROS**  
**MARIKINA**  
*EXCEPT*  
MARCOS HIGHWAY

**TAGUIG**  
*EXCEPT*  
C5  
EAST SERVICE ROAD  
MANUEL L. QUEZON

**MUNTINLUPA**  
*EXCEPT*  
ALABANG-ZAPOTE RD



Source: MMDA (Traffic Number Coding Scheme)

Viewed from this perspective, perhaps these puzzles concerning the number coding restrictions on jeepneys and buses in Metro Manila should be understood in terms of an underlying eco-system and equilibrium model governed by a mix of market incentives derived from urban transportation flows and rents derived from the franchising and regulatory agencies of the national and local government units overseeing these transportation flows in the National Capital Region. Perhaps a shift in the rules governing the available supply of jeepneys and buses on the major roads of Metro Manila, and in the regulatory powers of the MMDA and other traffic enforcement agencies over flows of jeepneys and buses over these roads, might not simply lead to enhanced supply of jeepneys and buses in line with commuter demand but other unanticipated outcomes instead. As for the prospects for such a shift in the first place,

perhaps the self-sustaining eco-system operating around MMDA's number coding restrictions is sufficiently robust in its rude health as to resist 'reform' for the foreseeable future.

Meanwhile, urban transport reform advocates have also focused energies on the easing of barriers to entry into the Premium P2P (Point-to-Point) Bus Service market, which provides non-stop, air-conditioned bus rides from shopping centers and other transport hubs in Metro Manila to and from local nodal points in the suburbs. Here they have urged the Land Transportation Franchising and Regulatory Board (LTFRB) to loosen some of the restrictions on P2P franchises found in LTFRB department orders issued in 2015 and 2017, during the period when these bespoke bus services were first introduced. Liberalization would open P2P franchises to unsolicited applications for existing or new routes, allow for smaller-capacity buses and smaller fleets, enable competition on P2P routes between rival operators, and leave discretion of fare-setting in the hands of P2P operators. The proposed reform thus promises a potentially transformative liberalization of this niche form of public transport which could enable existing owner-operators and other new entrants to expand their investments and thus increase supply of P2P buses connecting Metro Manila and its suburban hinterlands.



Urban transport reform advocates' focus on P2P buses makes ample sense within the broader eco-system of transportation and traffic in Metro Manila and its suburban hinterlands. P2P buses represent a very important transport sub-species within this eco-system, insofar as their premium service – comfortable, reliable, safe travel between up-market residential and commercial points – is more likely than any other mode of public transport to attract commuters who would otherwise clog the roads and streets of the National Capital Region with private vehicular traffic. Yet some research suggests that P2P bus services have experienced only limited growth since they first emerged in 2015, leading reform advocacy groups to suspect that market expansion is being hindered by excessively restrictive regulation and franchising.

At the same time, however, perhaps the broader eco-system itself is impeding P2P growth. After all, owner-operators of P2P bus services are privately willing to acknowledge the sizeable obstacles to entry, expansion, and profitability in this particular niche market within the broader transport eco-system in Metro Manila and its suburban hinterlands. The systemic problems of traffic congestion, after all, limit the profitability of P2P bus services and thus inhibit further investment and expansion of P2P fleets, routes, and passengers. The challenges of transport intermodality also loom large, as the ‘first mile’ and ‘last mile’ of commuters’ journeys beyond the two points covered by P2P services present impediments to the attraction of more car-purchasing/-owning/-riding commuters to premium buses shuttling between their areas of residence and employment. Some P2P service owner-operators suggest that there might be opportunities for linkage with transportation network vehicle service (TNVS) providers. Others even suggest that companies may already be exploring such possible linkages as of this writing. In other words, it is possible that the primary obstacles to growth in P2P bus services and passenger traffic lie not in the restrictions imposed on routes and franchises by the LTFRB, but rather elsewhere within the complex eco-system of urban and suburban transportation and traffic in Metro Manila and its hinterlands. Insofar as this is the case, then an easing of the formal restrictions on P2P franchises may not produce the anticipated result of expanding supply, given the relative inelasticity of demand.

In addition, owner-operators of P2P bus services also privately acknowledge the considerable ambiguities and inconsistencies which are evident in the actual operations of the LTFRB’s current system for awarding franchises and routes for P2P bus services in and around Metro Manila. Here there appears to be evidence of favoritism towards established bus companies, whose owners benefit from many years of experience and privileged access in their dealings with the LTFRB. There also appear to be anomalies in terms of the procedures and criteria governing the awarding of franchises and routes. In other words, as with buses and jeepneys, the actual franchising system for P2Ps operates in ways which may inhibit entry and expansion by some players while enabling flexible operation by other players, but not in strict accordance with the provisions of the LTFRB departmental orders of 2015 and 2017. Insofar as this is the case, the proposed easing formal restrictions on the awarding of P2P franchises and routes may not have the desired effect and impact of actually changing the actual rules of the game.

Finally, urban transport reform advocates have also been calling for the legalization of motorcycle taxis in Metro Manila and beyond. Here these reform advocates reason that the rising demand for such service provision over the past several years has rendered widespread illegal operations essentially inevitable and irrepressible, and that decriminalization could provide significant benefits in terms of greater safety, reliability, and quality of service provision, with legalization and regulation encouraging stronger qualifications, training, insurance coverage, and legal liability for motorcycle drivers and taxi service providers. Here they also reason that the legalization of motorcycle taxis in Manila and beyond would allow for the expansion of motorcycle taxi passenger traffic in ways which would supplement and synergize with other modes of transport in the National Capital Region and elsewhere, at least

in the short and medium term. As suggested above with reference to P2P bus services, for example, enhanced motorcycle taxi service provision could conceivably enable expansion of demand for P2P bus services and thus assist in weaning more commuters away from reliance on private car ownership and usage. The expansion and enhancement of motorcycle taxi service provision could further reduce reliance on automobile taxi services and automobile-based TNVS, most notably the Singapore-based company Grab (the dominant player in the market), thus further contributing to reductions in private automobile traffic and thus some easing of traffic congestion in Metro Manila and beyond.

Interestingly and perhaps revealingly, urban transport reform advocates have made more progress on the legalization of motorcycle taxis than on any other reform on their agenda, even in the face of continued resistance on the part of DOTr Secretary Tugade. In mid-2019, the DOTr partially reversed the LTFRB's November 2017 suspension of Angkas's operations in Metro Manila under a six-month pilot scheme limited to 27,000 Angkas drivers, with a Technical Working Group set up to evaluate the results in terms of road safety and service provision, even as a raft of new bills were filed in both houses of Congress calling for legalization of motorcycle taxis and the introduction of a new regulatory framework for their operations in Metro Manila and other major Philippine cities. For the time being, Angkas was effectively granted a monopoly on legal motorcycle taxi operations in Metro Manila, albeit one which capped the number of drivers (and thus limited expansion) and left the company reliant on government enforcement to close down the various fly-by-night unlicensed operators of rival services which repeatedly popped up on the Internet over the latter half of 2019.





In January 2020, however, the previously anticipated three-month extension of Angkas's effective short-term monopoly on motorcycle taxi provision was suddenly modified. Two new service providers, JoyRide and Move It, were now included in the three-month extension of the pilot scheme, with each of the three firms capped at 15,000 motorcycle taxi drivers across Metro Manila. The sudden emergence of JoyRide was met with considerable speculation as to the actual ownership and political affiliation of the company, with initial rumors suggesting that newly elected Senator Bong Go, a long-time personal assistant to President Rodrigo Duterte and former head of the Presidential Management Staff in 2016-2018, had a personal stake, and Senator Aquilino "Koko" Pimentel III, another close Duterte ally, also singled out for intervening to promote the interests of the firm. While these rumors and speculations generated a chorus of denials from the senators and JoyRide executives, the ownership of the firm was eventually revealed to include major shareholdings in the name of Ralph Nubla, a banker best known for his role as a business intermediary for long-time President Ferdinand Marcos (1966-86), the late father of former senator Bongbong Marcos (2010-2016), Duterte's vice-presidential running mate in 2016, and of current senator Imee Marcos, who was elected to her seat in 2019 on the Administration's senatorial slate.

As of this writing, the operations of these three motorcycle taxi services have been suspended due to the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic and the Enhanced Community Quarantine (ECQ) imposed by the Philippine government in March 2020, with drivers diverted to food delivery services until passenger rides are allowed to be resumed. Meanwhile, the proposed legalization of motorcycle taxis remains under consideration, both within DOTr and in Congress, where reform legislation is still pending. But for the time being, and perhaps for the foreseeable future, a triopoly has emerged under an irregular and insecure set of franchising arrangements under the discretion of the DOTr, the LTFRB, and key legislators affiliated with the Duterte administration. Of all the proposals for liberalization and deregulation promoted by urban transport reform advocacy groups, it is perhaps unsurprising and instructive that it is only the legalization of motorcycle taxis which has moved forward, and only moved forward into a protracted legal and regulatory limbo within which new cartel-like arrangements and old problems of rent-seeking and regulatory capture are amply apparent.

### Micro-mobility?

Beyond these proposals to ease and accelerate flows of vehicular traffic through the introduction of a BRT system and through selective liberalization and deregulation of jeepney, bus, P2P, and motorcycle taxi services across Metro Manila, transport reform advocacy groups have also focused considerable attention and energy on initiatives in the realm of what they term micro-mobility, in order to enable and encourage more travel within the National Capital Region by bicycle and by foot. For these transport reform advocates, cycling and walking are crucial complements to the proposed reorganization of vehicular transportation across Metro Manila and neighboring provinces, providing appealingly eco-friendly solutions to the problems of the 'first mile' and 'last mile' of commuters' daily journeys by public transport

and promoting a reconceptualization and reconfiguration of urban and suburban streets and roads in which people rather than automobiles are accorded priority.

Against this backdrop, over the past several years transport reform advocacy groups have been waging a multi-pronged campaign to expand bike lanes, sidewalks, and other pedestrian walkways in the hopes of enhancing and expanding micro-mobility across the National Capital Region. Here the vision is one similar to the ‘Metro Manila Greenways’ project conceived by the New York-based Institute for Transportation and Development Policy, which envisages and advocates the creation of an eco-friendly network of corridors for non-motorized transport connecting core areas of the metropolis. To this end, local government agencies and executives (i.e. mayors) have been lobbied, especially in cities like Pasig where the chief transport planner, Anton Siy, is a leading reform advocate with a special interest in micro-mobility. At the same time, senior officials within the Department of Public Works and Highways have also been approached and encouraged to consider procedural reforms which might enable if not ensure the institutionalization of new operating procedures and budgetary allocations at the national government level for the inclusion of bike lanes and sidewalks in road construction projects in Metro Manila and in other cities across the Philippines.



To date, the efforts of these transport reform advocates have produced only limited progress on the micro-mobility front in the face of the obstacles presented by the accumulated interests invested in the automobile-centered eco-system and the established landscape of streets and roads servicing automobile traffic across Metro Manila and beyond. Here it is worth noting the close if complex connections between land-use patterns, property taxes, real-estate

development, social inequalities, parking, and various kinds of transport flows. The eco-system in Metro Manila and its suburban hinterlands is one organized around and dominated by private vehicular traffic, with the automobile as its dominant species. Thus the changes necessary for the easing, enhancement, and expansion of pedestrian and bicycle traffic flows go far beyond the challenges of installing bike lanes and improving and expanding sidewalks across areas of the metropolis or establishing new procedures for roadworks projects at DPWH.

After all, as evident in the Metro Manila Greenways proposal, urban transport reform advocates' plans for the installation of bicycle lanes and the improvement and expansion of pedestrian walkways are most fully developed in certain kinds of contexts within the vast and diverse landscape of the National Capital Region. The Greenways proposal itself focuses on the cities of Makati, Mandaluyong, Pasig, and Taguig, with the up-market business, commercial, and residential districts of Makati City, the Bonifacio Global City (BGC), and the Ortigas Center as the core nodal areas within which existing 'high-quality pedestrian facilities' and appetites for walking, jogging, and cycling are most fully developed. Yet even here the prevalence of private automobile ownership among residents and high-end commuters and shoppers places a premium on road space – and parking spaces – that works to restrict the possibilities for the installation of new bicycle lanes and expanded walkways. As in the elite residential subdivisions and shopping areas found elsewhere in and around Metro Manila, private real-estate development has proceeded according to designs in which the automobile is accommodated at the expense of the pedestrian (or the cyclist) and the public utility vehicle passenger, as seen in tight restrictions on bus and jeepney routes (for the low-paid workers servicing these up-market areas). Strolling and cycling for pleasure may have an appeal as available options and atmospheric accoutrements of a privileged lifestyle in such settings, with safety, sanitation, and security set at standards resembling those found in, say, southern California. But real-estate and retail interests work against the opening of these sheltered enclaves to freer flows of passengers, pedestrians, or cyclists from beyond this socio-economic 'bubble', as urban transport reform advocates envisage through the introduction of a BRT system and the other reforms discussed above.





Meanwhile, elsewhere across Metro Manila and the neighboring suburban provinces of the National Capital Region, the prospects for the improvement and expansion of walkways and the installation of bicycle lanes have been similarly restricted by other kinds of constraints in the built environment and the broader transport eco-system. After all, in the densely latticed patchwork of residential and commercial areas catering to various social tiers of the broad mass of the population of the metropolis and neighboring suburban provinces, existing pressures on streets and roads have been intensifying with every passing year. Beyond the bus and jeepney routes coursing through major roads and thoroughfares, a growing number of cars and motorcycles are clogging the side streets and would-be shortcuts of Metro Manila.



For those unable to afford the luxury of private automobile or motorcycle ownership, moreover, fleets of so-called tricycles – motorcycles with covered sidecars – provide local transport, clustering in and around major shopping centers and connections to jeepney, bus, and rail lines, and further cluttering the streets with slow-moving, low-volume, and high-polluting vehicular traffic. Servicing a broad swathe of the local population, producing a steady stream of formal and informal operating fees which bolster local government coffers, and providing low-income regular employment to thousands of drivers, these tricycles constitute an additional alternative and impediment to the expansion and institutionalization of corridors for pedestrian and bicycle traffic in the towns and cities of the National Capital Region and neighboring suburban provinces. Thus transport reform advocates' proposals for more efficient, equitable, and eco-friendly forms of micro-mobility have continued to run up against the accumulated built environment, the established everyday practices of commuters and drivers, and the entrenched retail, real-estate, small-scale transport, and local political interests embedded in Metro Manila's private automobile-centered transport eco-system.





### Reform Without Reformists? The Public Utility Vehicle Modernization Program (PUVMP)

If transport reform advocacy groups have faced seemingly insurmountable obstacles to the introduction and implementation of these diverse reform proposals, then what about the prospects for other reforms initiated by the Philippine government itself? After all, President Rodrigo Duterte was elected in 2016 against the backdrop of widespread public dissatisfaction with the preceding Aquino administration's mishandling of transport policies, and in the context of his own perceived potential – and repeatedly expressed promises – for more decisive and effective action on this front. Indeed, alongside the President's infamous 'War on Drugs' and flirtation with China, a defining feature of the Duterte administration since its inauguration has been its aggressive pursuit of transportation and infrastructure development, embodied in the official slogan and program 'Build Build Build'.

While President Duterte and DOTr Secretary Tugade failed to secure 'emergency powers' from Congress to address traffic congestion despite persistent efforts on this front over the first three years of his six-year presidential term, his administration embarked on an ambitious Public Utility Vehicle Modernization Program (PUVMP) in mid-2017. Modelled after a project introduced with Asian Development Bank (ADB) support in Davao City during Duterte's preceding term as Mayor (2013-2016), the PUVMP focused on the reorganization and 'rationalization' of jeepney traffic across the Philippines, with a focus on major conurbations like Metro Manila. Here the impetus and imperative for the program was avowedly twofold. On the one hand, the PUVMP was designed to replace aging, unsafe, overly cramped, diesel-fuelled, smoke-belching jeepneys with new, larger, state-of-the-art, eco-

friendly vehicles with engines compliant with Euro 4 emission standards and higher carrying capacity, providing safer, more comfortable, efficient, and environmentally sound travel for higher numbers of passengers.



On the other hand, the PUVMP was also designed to shift jeepney operations from the ‘boundary system’ in favour of more efficient route management to eliminate driver incentives for frequent lane-changing, stopping, and idling while waiting for passengers, and thus to reduce traffic congestion. To this end, the new vehicles would be kitted out with CCTV cameras and GPS monitors, fire extinguishers, automated fare collection systems, front-facing seats, and new right-hand-side minibus-style doors for more orderly curb-side passenger embarkations and disembarkations at designated pick-up/drop-off stops. These two aims of the PUVMP corresponded to transport experts’ arguments and evidence indicating that the existing fleet of jeepneys and the established system of jeepney operations contributed significantly both to pollution and to traffic congestion in Metro Manila and other major conurbations in the Philippines.

Against this backdrop, the PUVMP began to unfold in mid-2017 according to a two-pronged strategy for implementation over a three to four-year period. On the one hand, the DOTr and attached agencies like the Land Transportation Franchising and Regulatory Board (LTFRB) imposed a timetable for the forced phasing out of old jeepneys and the introduction of new, improved vehicles, with guidelines and standards provided to enable and encourage the production of new prototypes and the manufacture of new vehicles by local companies and the purchase of these new vehicles to be subsidized by the government-run Land Bank of the Philippines (LBP) and Development Bank of the Philippines (DBP). On the other hand, a set of Omnibus Franchising Guidelines were issued, phasing out established routes and franchises for PUV operations and stipulating that bids for new routes and franchises could only be made by cooperatives or companies – rather than individual owners or owner-operators – willing and able not only to purchase and operate a fleet of new vehicles as per PUVMP standards, but also to establish and maintain a garage and terminal for the vehicles and a system for management of timetabled PUV operations and drivers working for hourly wages.

Two underlying – if publicly underplayed – elements of the PUV Modernization Program design were especially worthy of note. On the one hand, although the Program ostensibly encouraged and enabled jeepney drivers to work together to form cooperatives to purchase fleets of new vehicles and bid on new routes and franchises, the size and terms of the loans provided by the LBP and the DBP did not actually suffice for purposes of allowing owners and owner-operators to make successful transitions to the new system of PUV operations. In fact, the openly intended consolidation of PUV ownership and operations was quietly anticipated to unfold through a shift not only to larger, new-fangled vehicles, but also through a shift from jeepneys to buses on many routes. Thus PUV consolidation favored companies with the capital and the connections which were needed to secure the financing and the franchises needed for the new economies of scale, whether bus companies interested in expansion or companies already experimenting with and investing in new kinds of jeepneys. Such companies reportedly often included former DOTr and/or LTFRB officials on their boards or serving as intermediaries in their communications and consultations with these government agencies, as did many of those companies working to secure approval for the production design for new vehicles as well.



On the other hand, the implementation of the PUVMP entailed not only such a prohibitively costly transition from individual PUV ownership and operation of existing jeepneys to consolidation of corporate management of fleets of new vehicles, but also complex and cumbersome procedures for the reorganization of PUV routes and franchises across Metro Manila and in other urban areas across the Philippines. Across the country, local governments were tasked with the formulation of Local Public Transport Route Plans (LPTRPs) to provide the basis for new routes and franchises, subject to the approval of the LTFRB, with the DOTr contracting out the drafting of a plan to cover the sixteen cities and one municipality of Metro Manila. Under the PUVMP, this elaborate exercise in transport planning was to precede and prefigure the opening of new routes and franchises to bidding and the evaluation of bids by the LTFRB. In other words, not only were public utility vehicles to be modernized and PUV ownership and management consolidated, but the entire system of PUV routes and franchises was to be subjected to reorganization and new forms of franchising and regulation. Overall, the design of the PUV Modernization Program represented an ambitious holistic shake-up – or shakedown – of jeepney operations in Metro Manila and elsewhere across the Philippines.

In this context, the seemingly most puzzling and problematic feature of the PUVMP's design was the complex and cumbersome procedures for the reconfiguration of the entire system of franchises and routes to be overseen by the LTFRB. Here it is worth noting that neither the official aims of the PUVMP nor the underlying problems cited as justifying the need for the program included any reference to the existing network of jeepney routes or the system of franchising under the LTFRB. None of the studies undertaken in conjunction with the PUVMP and nothing produced by the DOTr or the LTFRB in connection with the program suggested that there was a mismatch between the current supply of jeepney vehicles on the roads and the current demand for jeepneys among passengers, or that there were structural inefficiencies in the jeepney market impeding its effective meeting of passenger demand for vehicle supply in the foreseeable future. The problems were seen to lie instead in aging, smoke-belching jeepney vehicles, on the one hand, and the perverse incentives responsible for congestion-enhancing jeepney driver behavior on the roads, on the other. The ostensible rationale for modernization, it appears, had nothing to do with the routes themselves.

Against this backdrop, the implementation of the PUVMP has clearly bogged down over the past three years since the inception of the program, with very few new-fangled jeepneys – or buses – operating on new PUV routes and franchises in Metro Manila or elsewhere across the Philippines as of 2020. The apparent failure of this ambitious government initiative can be understood as evidence of the seemingly insurmountable obstacles to top-down reorganization or reform presented by the accumulated interests and practices associated with jeepney traffic within the eco-system of urban transport in Metro Manila. After all, with an estimated 180-250,000 jeepneys nationwide, and perhaps a quarter of them operating in Metro Manila alone, thousands of livelihoods were jeopardized by the PUVMP, as were the established commuting routines of millions of Filipinos. Jeepney traffic reportedly accounts for more than 74 million passenger kilometres travelled in Metro Manila per year and around one-half of all peak-period passenger traffic in the metropolis, producing a commensurately dense traffic in regular 'protection' fees to LTFRB officials and various law-enforcement



officers as well. Small wonder that neither would-be manufacturers of new vehicles nor government officials tasked with drafting and implementing new Transport Route Plans overcame the skepticism and resistance which greeted the PUVMP from the outset. Instead, wait-and-see prevailed.

Thus as of early 2020, this ambitious government reform program appeared to have died something of a natural death, as seen in the quiet dropping of the PUVMP from the DOTr's budgetary planning for the next fiscal year. With the official deadline for the transition of jeepneys to the new requirements of the PUVMP approaching in mid-2020, a protracted legal limbo awaits, with franchises and routes to be extended – and then re-extended – on a provisional basis by the LTFRB. In the end, the government's seemingly ambitious, eco-friendly, and efficiency-enhancing reform program appears only to have extended and exacerbated the uncertainty and insecurity under which thousands jeepney drivers are forced to operate every day, as they struggle to find passengers and road space – and to pay their daily 'boundary' and various 'protection' fees – in order to make a modest living and to provide millions of Filipinos with public transportation in Metro Manila.

#### Conclusions: Crisis as Imperative and Opportunity for Transformative Reform?

In conclusion, the preceding analysis has sketched the broad structural contours – and suggested something of the intricate internal workings – of the eco-system producing and reproducing transportation flows and traffic gridlock in Metro Manila, while demonstrating the resilience and resistance of this eco-system to transformation through various efforts at 'reform'. The conception of transportation as a system is a long-established commonplace of transport studies, and an appreciation of the complex linkages between transportation, economic growth, land-use patterns, and real-estate development is a trademark strength of scholarship in this realm of study. The pages above have simply tried to extend this kind of systemic analysis to incorporate an understanding of the importance of the economic, institutional, and political context within which Metro Manila's transportation system is embedded. The preceding snapshots of various efforts to transform this system through 'reform' have served the dual purpose of illustrating some of the constituent elements – or 'species' – of this eco-system and illuminating the enduring strength and self-reproducing quality of the eco-system as it encounters, incorporates, and adapts to processes and pressures associated with demographic, economic, political, and technological change. Here the introduction of new 'species' within this eco-system – the P2P bus service, automobile- or motorcycle-based TNVS (e.g. Grab and Angkas), and the urban transport reform advocacy group – has been shown to induce a process of evolutionary change, but one characterized by absorption and re-equilibration rather than crisis and transformation.

But if the broader environment in which Metro Manila's transportation eco-system has been embedded is one in which demographic and economic growth have created 'climate change' generating increasing pressures forcing adaptation but not transformation, what about the sudden crisis created by the global COVID-19 pandemic and the resultant lockdown and

drastic reduction of economic activity, mobility, and traffic in the National Capital Region? With the imposition of an Enhanced Community Quarantine (ECQ) across Metro Manila and the rest of Luzon in March 2020, public transport slowed to a trickle in the metropolis, as did private automobile and motorcycle traffic. The flows of traffic sustaining the eco-system ceased their circulation.



Against this backdrop, urban transport reform advocacy groups shifted into high gear, merged to create a #MoveAsOne Coalition over April and early May 2020, and drafted a blueprint for the reorganization of Metro Manila's transportation system in the context of the crisis. In this blueprint for reform, the short-term imperative of protecting public health through 'social distancing' was treated as consistent with the longer-term imperative of promoting mobility through systemic reform. Thanks to the newly #MoveAs One Coalition advocates' active presence in the media and on social media and through their access to Duterte administration officials, they succeeded in presenting this blueprint leading DOTr officials, key legislators in both houses of Congress, and other key policymakers and the public at large.

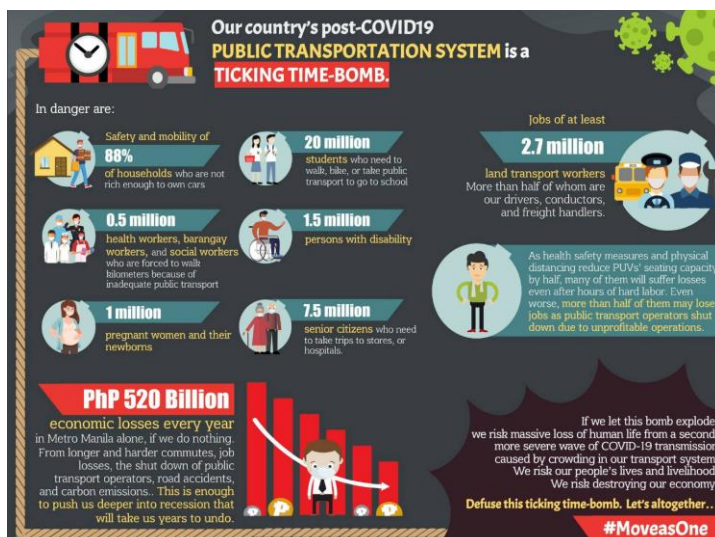
As the Duterte administration initiated a shift from its initial Enhanced Community Quarantine (ECQ) to a less stringent Modified Community Quarantine (MCQ) in mid-May 2020, the challenges of renewed movement on the streets and roads of Metro Manila presented themselves for urgent attention and action. To cope with this sudden resurgence of traffic, the blueprint presented by the #MoveAsOne Coalition recommended a set of measures to reduce the dangers of a second wave of the COVID-19 virus transmitted via the national capital region's transportation system.

Some of the recommended precautionary measures are self-evidently sensible and straightforward. Rail, bus, and other public transport vehicles should be operating at a maximum of 50% capacity, with passengers spaced out to maintain social distancing. Masks should be made mandatory for both passengers and drivers, temperature checks required prior to boarding, as well as impermeable barriers protecting drivers from infection by passengers and vice versa. Vehicles should be disinfected at least twice a day, with transport depots and offices likewise operating under equally strict procedures to maintain a high level of public hygiene. Similar measures are likewise recommended for the taxis, transportation network vehicle services (TNVS), and ‘tricycles’ providing the ‘first and last miles’ of daily commutes.

But the #MoveAsOne Coalition’s recommendations include a much more systemic reorganization of Metro Manila’s urban transportation system, in line with both the short-term exigencies of the pandemic and the longer-term imperatives of reducing traffic congestion in the national capital region once all restrictions on movement are lifted. Here the Coalition’s transport specialists are especially concerned about the difficulties of controlling the supply of public transport and constraining curb-side competition for passengers, the economic pressures on drivers to overload vehicles, and the risks of virus transmission accompanying the payment of fares in cash. In this context, the following major policy changes are recommended:

- A shift of all road-based public transport in the national capital region to government-contracted vehicles operating as a public service, both on trunk routes contracted by the DOTr and feeder routes contracted by local governments;
- Free bus and jeepney rides until a cashless fare collection system is established;
- A network of ‘safe streets’ closed to vehicular traffic, sidewalks improved and widened for pedestrians, and protected bike lanes established for cyclists.

Such recommendations for government provision of investment and infrastructure for public transport across Metro Manila are fully in line with urban transport reform advocates’ holistic vision of a more efficient, equitable, and eco-friendly transportation system for the national capital region over the years ahead.





Unfortunately, a plethora of obstacles stands in the way of the adoption of these recommendations by the Philippine government, at least the more ambitious – and costly – measures requiring public investment in Metro Manila’s transportation system. Here commentators often allude to the limited receptivity to such plans shown by DOTr Secretary Arthur Tugade, a stance usually attributed to his reported standoffishness and short-temperedness in the face of policy advice proffered from outside his own circle of personal advisors. But, as suggested above, the underlying impediments to a reorganization of Metro Manila’s public transportation system are much more structural and systemic, and they remain stubbornly strong even in the face of the ongoing crisis.

On the one hand, the institutional arrangements and resources for government oversight of, and investment in, the national capital region’s transportation system are woefully inadequate for purposes of implementing systemic reform. The Department of Transportation (DOTr) itself has a very limited *plantilla* and little in the way of institutional memory or capacity, with a pronounced reliance on short-term contractors and consultants. The DOTr, moreover, shares authority over Metro Manila’s transportation system with a set of ancillary or attached agencies, many of whose heads enjoy both formal prerogatives and personal/political linkages which undermine effective oversight by the DOTr Secretary. The Land Transportation Franchising and Regulatory Board (LTFRB), for example, is run by a long-time close associate of President Duterte from their hometown of Davao City, while the separate Land Transportation Office (LTO) is overseen by a former Director-General of the Philippine National Police (PNP), and the Light Rail Transit Authority (LRTA) is led by a



former PNP Intelligence chief who was once convicted for his role in a series of kidnappings in the 1990s. At the same time, the seventeen elected mayors of the constituent cities (and one municipality) of Metro Manila – and the Metro Manila Development Authority (MMDA) – are involved in traffic enforcement and other forms of transport regulation that overlaps and conflicts with the powers and prerogatives of the DOTr and its agencies.

On the other hand, the private business interests controlling the commanding heights of Metro Manila's transportation system are pitted against the agenda for holistic reform. A small cluster of diversified conglomerates have vested interests in the automobile sales (and private toll roads) which have flooded the thoroughfares of the national capital region with private cars, and they likewise control the slow, selective expansion of the limited rail system in line with their real-estate and retail interests across the metropolis and its hinterlands. A larger and looser cartel of bus companies remains concerned to protect its lucrative franchises and to preserve the 'boundary' system that leaves financial – and now physical – risks with bus drivers and ticket collectors, while ensuring a steady daily 'rent' for their fleets of vehicles. These private interests are heavily invested in the status quo – and well represented within the agencies of the national government, in Congress, and in city halls across Metro Manila – and ill-disposed towards holistic urban transport reform, as demonstrated in the pages above.

Thus as of this writing, the prospects for the adoption of the #MoveAsOne Coalition's blueprint for reorganizing public transport in Metro Manila to meet the challenges of the COVID-19 crisis appear to be constrained by enduring structural and systemic constraints. On the one hand, DOTr has issued a set of guidelines for local governments to enable and encourage the creation of bicycle lanes and the improvement and expansion of pedestrian walkways, and it has also signalled its interest in some form of consolidation of bus service, at least on the main thoroughfare of EDSA, if not quite a proper BRT system then a move in that direction. On the other hand, the proposal for government contracting and funding of bus and jeepney services and for inclusion of such a scheme within a stimulus package for the transport sector has yet to win endorsement, either from the DOTr or from Congress, even as pressures have continued to mount for a government bail-out of the two airlines sharing control over passenger air traffic across the archipelago, with the major corporate and banking interests involved making their influence felt within the Duterte administration and the legislature. Thus it remains to be seen whether even the extraordinary exigencies and urgent imperatives of COVID-19 crisis management will induce any serious and sustainable shifts in the workings of the transport eco-system of Metro Manila.