

Khaw ropes in water agency chief as adviser on ‘rail transformation’

First priority is rail reliability, says minister, pointing to HK’s MTR as goal

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AFTER taking over the hottest seat in town, newly-appointed Transport Minister Khaw Boon Wan wasted no time in roping in his adviser – an engineering expert who helped diversify Singapore’s water supply – to improve the nagging rail issues that observers said prompted the shock resignation of his predecessor.

On Friday, Mr Khaw, who is also Coordinating Minister for Infrastructure, said in a blog entry that he had asked the national water agency’s chairman, Tan Gee Paw, to be his adviser on rail transformation.

Mr Khaw, who took over the transport portfolio from Lui Tuck Yew who left politics in August, said that Mr Tan was the first individual he had consulted for ad-

vice and suggestion as soon as he was told of his new posting.

Mr Tan, 71, drew up the master plan to clean the Singapore River, helped to diversify the country’s water sources and oversaw the development of Newater, Singapore’s brand of reclaimed water. He was recently feted with the Institution of Engineers Singapore’s (IES) Lifetime Engineering Achievement Award.

“We discussed the problem of rail disruptions, its possible causes and how we can make rail service as reliable as PUB services. We also discussed the industry structure for bringing about better alignment of incentives. We wondered aloud on how we would structure our rail companies, if we were to start afresh,” Mr Khaw shared.

The two men discussed the larger vision of a Singapore where public transport could be so convenient, reliable and hassle-free that there would be no need to own a car.

“We had so much in common on how the future transport system could be like and how to move from here to there. I asked

him to be my Adviser on Rail Transformation (ART), with an immediate priority to ramp up rail reliability,” wrote Mr Khaw.

“This will require a serious re-focus on the part of every player (the Ministry of Transport, Land Transport Authority, Singapore Mass Rapid Transit, SBS Transit) that we are in the engineering business, founded on strong engineering expertise and capabilities. We are no miracle workers, but given political will, clarity of purpose, dogged determination, we are confident that we will arrive at where we want public transport to be. But we need time to bring about this rail (and real) transformation.”

Singapore’s rail system has been plagued by frequent train breakdowns which angered commuters and led to a costly S\$10 million public inquiry in 2012.

In a separate blog post entitled “Catching up with HK”, Mr Khaw elaborated on the need to catch up with the Hong Kong Mass Transit Railway (MTR), widely seen by experts as the best in class in providing rail reliability to commuters.

“Our operators, SMRT and SBST, must seek to match MTR’s reliability and close the gap as soon as possible,” he said. “We are now behind Hong Kong MTR, but we shall catch up. Do give us some time to address all these problems.”

Mr Khaw noted that while efforts in recent years have improved train reliability in the city-state, the situation is still not good enough.

The average distance travelled before a delay of more than five minutes for Singapore’s North-South and East-West Lines (NSEWL) has improved to 137,000 train-km, but it is still far short of MTR’s performance of about 300,000 train-km.

Last year alone, Singapore has 10 major disruptions – defined as delays exceeding 30 minutes – across all its train lines, compared to MTR, which had 12 even though their network is significantly longer than Singapore’s.

“My immediate priority is on these major disruptions: what caused the past disruptions, can we prevent a repeat, what other possible causes have we identi-



MR TAN

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fied, and have we addressed those causes as well?” Mr Khaw said.

The consensus view is that Singapore has under-invested in rail maintenance, and its engineering capabilities in this area are still lacking. It needs to ramp up investment in this area as well as recruit and retain more skilled workers. “All these are significant challenges, not easy to resolve quickly, but we are determined to overcome them. We will need time to turn around and then stabilise the situation,” he said. Until that happens, Singaporeans must be “mentally prepared for the next disruption”.