

Downtown Line Stage 2 back on track for Dec start

Bukit Panjang commuters' woes will ease then: Minister

By LIM YAN LIANG

THE 12 stations of Stage 2 of the Downtown Line will open this December after all, as longer construction hours and more efficient work processes managed to make up the time lost when a key contractor went bust in 2013.

Announcing the good news during a ministerial visit to the Zhenghua ward in Bukit Panjang yesterday, Transport Minister Lui Tuck Yew assured residents that their journeys to the city centre – now troubled by light-rail breakdowns and traffic congestion – would be eased by year end.

He credited the support of residents for longer construction

hours as a key reason that works could catch up to the original schedule, which hit a snag when Austrian firm Alpine Bau filed for insolvency in June 2013. It was the main contractor for the three stations of King Albert Park, Sixth Avenue and Tan Kah Kee.

Two other builders, Australia's McConnell Dowell and South Korea's SK E&C, took over Alpine's contracts, and the Land Transport Authority (LTA) re-looked and sped up work processes. For example, it built a local control centre at Little India station so that it could commence testing of the system while work continued on the three affected stations, said Mr Lui.

“I think this will be welcome news to people living in the western and north-west corridor,” he told reporters after the dialogue.

The journey time from Bukit Panjang to the financial district, which is now about an hour, will drop by 20 minutes with the Downtown Line, which has four interchange stations to link residents to the North-East, North-South and Circle Lines.

The LTA filed about \$500 million in claims against Alpine, but Mr Lui said he does not expect the outstanding claims or the expedited works to affect the project's budget.

“We can be within the budget of Downtown Line,” he said.

Yesterday's dialogue with residents came at the tail end of a visit in which Mr Lui visited dumpling festival stalls and distributed care packs to needy residents in Zhenghua.

The hour-long session was dominated by transport concerns, with residents raising issues from bus congestion to car ownership.

Father of four Wong Kan How, 43, suggested that the Transport Ministry look into a certificate of entitlement (COE) rebate scheme to allow families of three or more children to own a private car. This would help boost the birth rate, said the financial trainer.

Mr Lui said he understood the aspiration to own a car, but more cars would mean more roads – leaving less space for parks and greenery that Singaporeans desire.

He said the Ministry of Social and Family Development has schemes to help those in need have access to private transport.

Community facilitator Chelvi Sinniah said the bus links from Bukit Panjang to town were insufficient for the neighbourhood's growing population, adding that many drivers today could not answer questions about the bus route in English.

Mr Lui noted that the number of buses serving the route has doubled since it was introduced in 2013. And with the opening of Stage 2 of the Downtown Line adding 50 per cent more capacity to the public transport network in western Singapore, the strain on bus services should ease, he said.

“We will watch how things stabilise over a three- to six-month period and then make necessary adjustments accordingly,” he said.

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