

Khaw stresses need to ramp up investment in rail maintenance

He says rail operators SMRT, SBS Transit need to close gap to match reliability standards of Hong Kong's MTR

Adrian Lim

Transport Minister Khaw Boon Wan yesterday emphasised the need to ramp up investment in rail maintenance, and recruit more skilled workers to match the reliability standards of Hong Kong's metro system.

Rail operators SMRT and SBS Transit should "close the gap" in reliability between the MRT network and Hong Kong's Mass Transit Railway (MTR), he said.

In a blog post, he noted that while the situation in Singapore has improved in recent years, it is "still not good enough".

On the North-South and East-West lines, the average distance travelled before a delay of more

than five minutes is 137,000 train-km. This is still far short of MTR's performance of about 300,000 train-km, he pointed out.

On the Circle Line, the distance travelled before a delay is 176,000 train-km, while the North-East Line logs about 198,000 train-km before a delay.

Mr Khaw noted that there were 10 major disruptions – defined as delays exceeding 30 minutes – caused by technical issues across Singapore's rail network last year.

While there were 12 such incidents on the MTR, its network is significantly longer than Singapore's, he said. As of August, Singapore's rail network spans 183km, while the MTR's is more than 218km.

"The consensus view is that we have underinvested in rail maintenance, and our engineering capabili-

ties in this area are still lacking. We will need to ramp up investment in this area. We will need to recruit and retain more skilled workers."

He said he had asked PUB chairman Tan Gee Paw to be his "Adviser on Rail Transformation".

Mr Tan was someone who had built up a local core of engineers in PUB and also developed the water engineering field, Mr Khaw said.

He said Mr Tan's immediate priority is to raise rail reliability – a task that will require "a serious re-focus" on engineering from the Transport Ministry, the Land Transport Authority, SMRT and SBS Transit.

However, Mr Khaw said it will take time to "turn around" and "stabilise" the situation. "We should therefore be mentally prepared for the next disruption. We will be very disappointed when it happens, but we shall stand up, lick our wounds, examine the causes, and work very hard to prevent a repeat," he said.

The MRT network was hit by its worst disruption on July 7, when a

massive breakdown crippled both the North-South and East-West lines. Operator SMRT was fined a record \$5.4 million.

SIM University's Adjunct Associate Professor Park Byung Joon said the MTR is older than the MRT, yet it is more reliable. The MTR started operations in 1979, and the MRT, from 1987. "My personal opinion is that the MTR Corporation has a mindset geared towards achieving engineering excellence. When it comes to maintenance, it's not just about implementing guidelines and checklists, but making sure every employee takes it to heart," he said.

Communications executive Brandon Tan, 35, who visits Hong Kong about three times a year for leisure, said: "The MTR is definitely reliable – trains arrive on the dot according to schedule. I feel like when I travel on our MRT, I have to cater for some buffer time in case the trains run slower."

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CLOSING THE GAP

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**TRANSPORT MINISTER
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