

‘Rat catchers’ needed to ease rail woes: Khaw

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“Rat catchers”, or sharp-eyed engineers who can spot potential problems, can play a part in easing Singapore’s rail woes, Transport Minister Khaw Boon Wan suggested yesterday following yet another train disruption.

Referring to a disruption of nearly two hours on the North-East Line yesterday, he wrote in a blog post: “Such breakdowns tarnish our reputation, and we are re-doubling our efforts to improve train reliability. Singaporeans deserve better.”

In the post, Mr Khaw shared an e-mail he had received from Mr Tan Gee Paw, chairman of national water agency PUB, who is advising him on rail transformation.

In the e-mail, Mr Tan wrote that to deal with breakdowns, the agencies involved have to “go beyond codes of practice and do preventive risk analysis on the entire system”. Third-party consultants or external engineers should not be the only solution, he said. “They will use the same codes of practice and design practices and often conclude the system is by and large intact and what happened was unfortunate and can easily be rectified.”

“We need to engage street-smart, sharp-eyed practising engineers in systems engineering for rails alongside the third-party consultant,” Mr Tan added, dubbing these engineers “rat catchers”. “They are the ones who will walk through the system and spot the risky parts of the system, beyond the codes of practice and alert us on what modifications must be made urgently,” he said.

Mr Tan said he speaks from experience. In the 1980s, PUB’s first refuse incineration plant suffered a total shutdown after a rat tried to jump across two bus bars, a kind of electrical conductor, and short-circuited the entire plant. “The bus bars were spaced according to standards, but no one was sharp-eyed enough to think a rat would jump across.”

As the rail system ages, more “rats” will appear, he said. “Unless we can get this done quickly, pouring massive engineering manpower to beef up maintenance will never get us out of this mess. No amount of good maintenance can make up for rats running around.”

Noting that Mr Tan’s experience showed through in the e-mail, Mr Khaw said: “With his assistance, we will tackle this problem of rail reliability.”