

Balancing sustainability and affordability in the Philippine transit system

The just imposed fare increase for the Light Rail Transit Line 1 (LRT-1) has been described by critics as “unfair,” “anti-poor,” and “untimely,” as the increase sparked outrage among commuters and labor groups. The Trade Union Congress of the Philippines (TUCP) and Bayan Muna, among others, have denounced the increase, arguing it adds to the burden of minimum wage workers already grappling with.

For its part, Akbayan threatened mass demonstrations if the Department of Transportation (DOTr) does not intervene to halt the fare increase. Others have blamed the privatization deal between the Light Rail Manila Corp. (LRMC) and the government as the root cause of what they say is exorbitantly steep price hikes.

But in the midst of such criticism, we also need to zoom out and see the broader context: the operating sustainability of LRT-1 and the improvements that have been made since LRMC started to manage it as early as 2015.

Since the assumption of LRMC in operating the line, the LRT-1 system has become significantly more efficient and much more reliable. For one, it has made significant improvements by rehabilitating the existing system and extending the LRT-1 system at a cost of P36.3 billion. Among others, the private sector partner of the Department of Transportation has increased the number of functional light rail vehicles from 77 to 144 trains; there is almost 100% system reliability in operating LRT-1 which shows that LRMC provides continuous, smooth and safe operations to all commuters; it has updated the 40-year-old operating systems; and the biggest improvement is the completion of Phase 1 of the Cavite Extension Project, which

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expands LRT-1’s reach, relieving traffic congestion in the metropolis.

FARE HIKE’S SUSTAINABILITY IMPACT

This most recent fare adjustment — approved by DOTr and which took effect on April 2 — is just the second fare hike granted within the life of the agreement between LRMC and the DOTr. Based on records, LRMC has already spent sizable investments upgrading the LRT-1 system and yet it has only increased fares once since 2015. This fare hike will enable LRMC to continue with its current initiatives to further upgrade the transit system, through enhancements to station amenities, train maintenance, and infrastructure developments that will serve the riding public.

Clearly and simply put, if you don’t have enough money, you can’t sustain those improvements. Commuters, especially those who use the service on a daily basis, would once again have to deal with longer waiting times, more frequent breakdowns, and old facilities, which were the sorry state of affairs before LRMC stepped in, when fares were not calibrated correctly.

But critics say the fare increase unfairly hit poor and working-class commuters, and this misses the point about the long-term value of a good functioning railway system. In reality, it is the ordinary daily passengers of the LRT-1 service, particularly those who utilize the train as their main mode of transport, who bear the brunt of any disruption. Ordinary commuters would benefit from a more efficient LRT-1 that runs



PHILIPPINE STAR/JOHN RYAN BALDEMOR

on time — and are not forced to take time-consuming, less efficient, more costly modes of transportation such as buses or jeepneys.

On a short-term basis, fare increases may be financially strenuous for passengers, but they lead to the provision of more dependable service in the long run which results in savings and decreases in costs. A reliable train network leads to less surprises in your trip time, shorter wait times, and less reliance on taxis or buses as alternative transportation, all of which lead to more predictable and cheaper commuting costs.

As previously reported, many protest groups believe privatization is also the primary reason for the fare hikes and have requested a review of LRMC’s contract. They say government control of the railway would end what they

consider price-gouging. But this claim does not account for inefficiencies in the way operations are run when government-run rail systems are underfunded.

While these sectors claim that the fare hike will simply redound to serve the corporate interests of the company, the hard truth is that the added revenue will mainly directly support and sustain LRMC’s capacity and ability to provide necessary system maintenance, expansion, and service quality improvements.

Evidently, improvements would not have been possible under purely government-controlled operations, given the inefficiencies and red tape historically associated with state-run transport systems. Privatization ensures long-term investments, improved service quality, and system sustainability — something that would not be achievable

under a purely government-subsidized model.

From this vantage point, the opposition to privatization is ideological, not practical. If we remove private sector participation, where will the government find the funding to maintain and expand our transit infrastructure? Relying on government subsidies alone is unrealistic and will only lead to delays, mismanagement, and a return to the inefficient, breakdown-prone system of the past.

Additionally, government-run transit systems in developing countries often suffer from mismanagement, bureaucratic bottlenecks, and political interference. LRMC, as a private operator, prides itself on working under a performance delivery framework whereby profitability is directly related to an efficient and high-quality service. This way, you can combine financial

discipline with the public spirit, which guarantees that everything remains sustainable and accountable — as opposed to the slow-moving, government-run machine of the past.

It should also be noted that LRMC cannot unilaterally increase fares. Fares may change with DOTr approval and are always considered closely before being implemented. The belief that “privatization results in fare hikes” fails to take into account the role of regulatory oversight in shaping fare-setting policies and is therefore an oversimplification.

Ultimately, the government and its private sector partners walk a tightrope of sustainability and affordability.

Even at a time when the focus should be on affordability, the push toward sustainable operations is critical, and the fare increase is one of the main steps in that direction. The LRT-1 is an efficient mode of transport for many thousands of daily commuters and thus serves the purpose of decongesting the roads and reducing carbon emissions through decreased dependence on cars.

Though it may not endear the LRT-1 to the riding public, the fare increase has become necessary to maintain and improve service on the LRT-1. But to keep the LRT-1 operational, it’s not all about increases in fare; it’s about empowering the riding public with superior, agile, and responsive transport in the light of the deteriorating mass transit situation of Metro Manila commuters. ■

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Sansó: A story on art collectors

The great Spanish artist with a Filipino heart Juvenal Sansó, has passed to eternity. He takes his place among the pantheon of stars with his artist-friends and the art collectors who have gone before him.

There have been many wonderful tributes to his genius and his art, his many awards and achievements in the international art world.

As a friend, Sansó was always kind, affectionate, thoughtful, generous, and supportive. He was brilliant and had a sense of humor that was infectious. He clowning around during pictorials with photographers. He was always modest and self-effacing about his own accomplishments.

The witty raconteur was a good writer who shared his impressions on life and art collectors. He showed his keen observation of people and the process of authentication.

Here are excerpts from a personal letter (1990) he wrote that was first published in this column in 2015.

Maestro Sansó (or “Juvi” as close friends called him) had graciously accepted the invitation to mount a solo exhibit at the Artist’s Corner of the Hotel InterContinental Manila. This writer-artist was then the hotel’s PR director who managed the gallery. It was an honor to have worked closely with him. His spontaneous comments are still relevant in today’s environment.

He remarked, “I think that you will agree on what the painter feels about before and during the presentation of one’s works to the very wide variety of collectors, pseudo-collectors and studio wanderers.”

He wrote: “I must tell you a story that illustrates this purpose... Highly knowledgeable psychologists placed a monkey in

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a room filled with mirrors and all kinds of things used in a house to see what this animal would do in such circumstances.

“When the scientists put their eye in the keyhole to observe... Guess what they saw? They saw the monkey’s eye observing THEM!

“This happens to all artists who show paintings to prospective buyers in any place around the world. The Philippines in not an exception.”

He wrote an aside: “(I must underline the fact that I am not speaking of Filipino collectors exclusively... for someone might be offended if he or she thinks I am talking about him or her. My observations are a result of long years of practicing my vocation and its complement: that of presenting the works to the art — lover.)

“There are basic characters in the attitudes and strategies used by both sides that have a most interesting interplay of psychology. I shall be underlining the most atypical of cases for they will allow us to understand that [there] are, in between the extremes, the kind and normal persons who only leave a happy aura behind when they leave.

“A very interesting case is the boyfriend of a wealthy business lady who was buying some of my works and who told him to do likewise. The poor fellow was in such a tight fix that he was sweating like a squeezed sponge all over the place... The perfect case of the *napasubo*. I could not release him from his predicament for I didn’t know what the intentions of the



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JUVENAL SANSÓ at the Fundacion Sansó’s inaugural exhibit in November 2014.

lady friend were; what kind of test he was going through. When confronted with another solution, classical.

“First, he was only going to like the ‘reserved’ or ‘sold’ items in the studio. When similar works were presented, he would want them in a different size. His perspiring was getting so bountiful that I had to take my books and drawings away from this human fountain. Seeing the poor fellow suffer so much and seeing how the lady seemed to push this torture, I kept on the fence, waiting for some release. I wonder what the score at the end was! He left without buying but maybe not earning his stripes with Lady Love, of course, he promised to come back... promises, promises!

“There are many ways that I use to judge if people in the studio are seriously interested in my works or simply taking a cultural *paseo* with his friends either to

show how they know painting or the painter. If I hear too much chatting among my visitors, I may put a painting upside down to test their attention. If the second time I do this, they still have not reacted, then I terminate the presentation saying I don’t have any finished works to show. It’s best for everyone.

“Life is too short for me to devote time to indifference...

“In the studio, more than three or four viewers at a time are to be avoided because they form sub-groups chatting among themselves or try to impress one another with their knowledge and their culture. This verbal smartypants ping-pong never profits the artist for he or she rarely learns anything from the show-offs except how ignorant they are and how pedantic are the ones who know a bit.

“There is, sometimes, the decoration-oriented buyer who

would rather choose a mediocre artwork that goes well with the curtains and wallpaper rather than a strong piece by a better painter...”

“I have relaxed and let each collector react according to his or her cultural capacity. What is important is that he or she makes the first step and feels motivated enough to spend hard-earned money on a painting.

“If the first step was the curtain, after a while, the painting dominates and projects its inner message. Eventually the curtain is changed. The curtain has no inner message from a sensitive human being. The kids grow up with art around them and this second generation will have seen the painting ‘first’ and forgotten the curtains.

“Authenticating by the artist himself is not a problem at all... I have a dozen elephants’ memory for my own works for they are

a result of emotional, technical, stylistic factors that, at a glance, they come back to me...

“The immediate members of the family may be the second choice if the artist is dead; experts, assuming that the word expert is truly legitimate, may guide the collector to select the right (authentic) pieces. A reputable gallery is a very good base too... There are some, really!

“Buying directly from the artist (an honest artist, of course) is still the best guaranty of authenticity... straight from the carabao’s mouth: or the Monkey’s eye?”

Sansó was one of the most prolific, well-loved artists. His artworks are in the major collections of international museums and distinguished families around the world. He inspired a generation of artists.

Sansó was Catalan, born in Barcelona 95 years ago. He came with his parents and sister to Manila at age four. They founded the well-known Arte Español wrought iron furniture business.

A graduate of the University of the Philippines College of Fine Arts, he lived and worked in Paris for more than six decades. He traveled often but Manila was always his home. He spoke Spanish, French, and English. He used to startle people (with his piercing blue eyes) whenever he suddenly spoke in fluent Filipino!

The artist lives on in his exquisite artworks and in the hearts of the people who love him.

A blessed Easter to all! ■

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