

Transforming a motorcycle city: the long wait for Hanoi's metro

Vietnam's first metro system continues to be delayed, but in a city with more motorbikes than households - and whose love affair with the car is only increasing - the real obstacle may be shifting public attitudes

Emily Petsko in Hanoi

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Hunkering down under a sliver of shade along Cau Giay Street, west of Hanoi's city centre, Ha Van Son reclines on the seat of his motorbike taxi. The tree overhead offers little respite from the blistering sun, but he needs to earn a living, so he lowers his kickstand to the pavement and waits. Across the street, some new competition is being built. T-shaped beams tower above the narrow, clogged road: the beginnings of Vietnam's first metro system.

The thirty-something driver isn't worried about job security, though. Like so many of his compatriots, he has accustomed to flitting from one job to the next, according to the whims of the nation's rapidly growing economy. "If Vietnam wants to develop, we should get the metro," he says. "It will reduce vehicles on the roads and make our society more modern."

Hanoi, a city with more motorbikes than households, has to contend with heavy congestion and frequent traffic accidents. In recent years, studies have named it among the worst cities in Asia for air pollution. In May this year, Vietnamese media reported that the US embassy's air quality monitor in Hanoi registered a "hazardous" spike in particulate matter, reportedly reaching a level seven times that recommended by the World Health Organisation.

Though the government hopes the metro can tackle both traffic and environmental issues at once, the project has faced numerous delays and setbacks. What's more, convincing Hanoians to give up their motorbikes could turn out to be the biggest challenge yet.

In 2008, more than 80% of journeys in the city were carried out by motorbikes and scooters - and a fast-growing share of the population is opting for cars. Currently there are roughly 4.9 million motorbikes and scooters on Hanoi's roads. The use of bicycles, once the dominant transport mode in the city, decreased dramatically as motorbikes and cars became more popular: in 1995, 47% of journeys were made by bicycle; in 2008, the figure had dropped to only 3%.

Hanoi's Transport Plan aims to increase the share of public transport from the current low figure of 9% of trips, to above 60% by 2030, by which time Hanoi is slated to have six new metro lines and three Bus Rapid Transit (BRT) lines. But the ambitions get even steeper. Last month, Hanoi's Party Committee outlined plans to ban motorbikes from the downtown area by 2025, in line with improved public transport. A total downtown ban of the vehicles would require a huge lifestyle shift for most residents - and put an enormous amount of pressure on the new metro system. None of the locals I speak to regard the 2025 plan as feasible.

Ho Chi Minh City is planning a metro project of its own, with two of the eight planned lines currently under construction and the first due to open in 2020. Both the Ho Chi Minh City and

Hanoi projects have been described as Vietnam's first metro systems, but which network will open first remains to be seen. In Hanoi, a 12.5km line connecting the Nhon area to the downtown railway station was supposed to be operational by December 2016, but the expected completion date has been pushed back to 2020.

According to the Asian Development Bank (ADB), a funding source of the project, about 15% of construction had been completed by the end of 2015. The line, which will be partially underground, will have 12 stations and is expected to accommodate 754,000 passengers a day by 2030.

Hanoi-based urban planner Floriane Ortega, who worked on the planning of metro lines one and two, says the project has faced delays for several reasons. For one, there are resettlement and compensation issues involved in the construction project, and Vietnam lacks an overarching transport authority to streamline efforts. Hanoi Metropolitan Railway Management Board, the governmental body that oversees the metro project, did not respond to requests for comment.

A line being constructed by Chinese contractor China Railway has encountered deadline delays, funding shortages and safety problems from falling construction debris. Ortega explains that overall coordination between the contractors on different lines - French, South Korean, Japanese and Chinese firms - is lacking. There are issues with contractors wanting to use different ticketing systems, as well as a lack of consensus on how to best integrate stations, which could force pedestrians to exit one station and enter another if the problem is left unresolved, she says.

If these obstacles are overcome "the metro will dramatically change the notion of public space in this country," Ortega says, explaining that public spaces and pavements are currently used more for motorbike parking than for pedestrians. But once the metro opens, commuters who walk from stations to their destinations could force the pavements to be used for their intended purpose once again.

But there's one more caveat to a thriving public transport system: Vietnam must first conquer its car problem.

The country has agreed to eliminate all import duties by 2018 on cars originating from the 10 nations within the Asean Economic Community, of which it is a member. In addition, a reduced luxury tax on cars, which went into effect on 1 July this year, slashed the price tag for vehicles with engines of less than 1.5 litres. "The Vietnamese have a huge demand for cars, especially family cars," says salesman Nguyen Xuan Gioi, who works in a Toyota dealership near the Cau Giay metro line. "In 10 years, I think Hanoi will be like Bangkok. There will be more cars and fewer motorbikes."

Hanoi's urban layout begs to differ. Many streets, especially around the expansive West Lake, can only accommodate one vehicle at a time, forcing drivers on to pavements. In one neighbourhood, paths have been torn out and the roads widened to meet anticipated demand from car drivers once a nearby housing development is constructed.

Jason Rush, communication specialist for ADB's south-east Asia branch, says the car craze is problematic for a city trying to sell the virtues of public transportation. "Hanoi over the past 10 years has gone through somewhat of a car renaissance," he says. "A lot of people are purchasing automobiles for the first time who were never able to afford them in the past."

Currently, less than 10% of Hanoians use public transportation. The public bus is cheap, but petrol to fill up a motorbike is even cheaper. Some residents are questioning whether an

unspoken motivation for the metro project and the planned motorbike ban is to clear bikes off the streets to make room for more cars.

Steve Jackson, head of communications for an international NGO who has lived in Hanoi since 2004, says the transition to cars has made him nostalgic for the waning days of the motorbike. At least traffic moved before cars came around, he muses. “It’s great if comfortable affordable public transport can be provided for the less well off - but not if it means the aim is to leave the roads for the wealthy and their cars,” he says.

It’s hard to envision a Vietnamese city without motorbikes. It’s not uncommon for locals to drive to the bakery at the end of their alley or to “walk” their dogs while steering their bikes with one hand, canines trotting alongside.

Part of that attachment is driven by notions of economic progress. “It represents freedom, it represents status sometimes, and it’s hard to convince people to make the switch from that to public transport,” Rush says.

ADB’s marketing efforts will focus on changing public sentiment about mass transportation. They are taking a page from the metro systems in Seoul, Los Angeles and Bangkok, all of which marketed the metro as trendy and increased the number of discretionary riders.

At the end of the day, Rush says, whether or not people use the metro depends on several factors: accessibility, affordability, aesthetics and amenities. The system should have accommodating parking lots, Wi-Fi and inviting and accessible spaces surrounding metro stations, he says. Another approach is to market the metro as a lifestyle choice. One idea being tossed around is to issue multipurpose metro cards, allowing electronic payments to be made at businesses around the city, similar to Hong Kong’s octopus card.

This change won’t happen overnight, and ADB will conduct studies over the next 12 to 18 months to determine which demographics are most likely to use the metro and for what reasons. Convincing residents to take the metro will likely get easier in time, once the system is more far-reaching.

“It’s easier to do when you have a big vibrant train system that penetrates every neighbourhood,” Rush says. “Obviously in Hanoi there’s only going to be a few lines initially, so you have to have a medium-term trajectory for this.”

For now, Hanoians will just have to keep donning their traffic fatigues - face masks and Hello Kitty helmets - and battling it out for their spot on the streets.

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