

Singapore rolls out tough measures to keep cars off the roads

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But urban planners looking for solutions to gridlock may find the draconian measures hard to replicate in other less-compliant cities.

Singapore has gone further than any other major city to avoid the monster jams that have blighted Asian metropolises such as Jakarta or Manila.

The tough approach has been possible as Singaporeans are used to strict control—with media closely monitored and harsh punishments for minor crimes—and are fearful the city-state will be flooded with vehicles without the curbs.

However the model faces mounting criticism thanks to rush-hour jams that have frustrated commuters, surging vehicle prices after a freeze on car numbers, and public [transport](#) breakdowns.

"I think the system can be made better and fairer," Joel Lee, a 28-year-old technician, told AFP.

He said authorities should make "a distinction between those who need cars, be it for work or family commitments, and those who just want more cars as a status symbol".

Six times the price

Authorities' main tool is the certificate of entitlement, or COE. Every potential car buyer must bid for a certificate and the cost is added to the vehicle price.

The current cost of a COE for an average family car is almost Sg\$50,000, pushing the price of a Toyota Corolla to Sg\$114,000 (US\$83,000).

But COEs fluctuate depending on demand and at their high point four years ago the same car was Sg\$159,000 (US\$127,000 at the exchange rate at the time)—six times the price in the US.

The certificates are valid for 10 years, after which the car must be scrapped or the certificate renewed.

Despite the high price, many in the financial centre, home to hordes of wealthy expats and millionaires, have bought cars, with some 600,000 on the streets—a considerable number for a limited road network.

Other key measures include controlling the number of vehicles on the road and charging tolls on main roads at busy times.

Authorities last month decided to freeze the number of private cars on the road from February for at least two years, citing land scarcity.

But the decision sparked anger and was followed by a jump in the price of COEs by several thousand dollars, in what the Straits Times newspaper described as "panic buying".

To mitigate its tough policies, Singapore has built a modern [public transport network](#) with a subway, overland trains and buses, and the government recently announced a plan to spend Sg\$28 billion to upgrade the system.

Ride-hailing apps Grab and Uber have helped those unable or unwilling to spend on a car, and the government plans to build 700 kilometres (430 miles) of cycle paths.

But the subway has recently been hit by repeated delays and breakdowns during rush hour. In the most serious incident for years a tunnel on the network flooded last month, crippling a main line for 20 hours, and

sparking widespread anger.

'Car-lite' woes

Some are now questioning the government's plan to make Singapore a country where most people walk, cycle or take public transport.

"The government has been trying to make the city 'car-lite' but you have a train system that's not very reliable," Jason Lin, a 66-year-old retiree, told AFP.

"If you take a bus, because there are so many cars, it'll take a long time. It can be very frustrating."

Speaking in parliament this month, Lam Pin Min, a senior minister of state for transport, insisted there significant growth in the transport network was planned and there would be "less need to own a car".

Singapore has not heavily promoted electric cars as it pushes [public transport](#)—unlike rival financial hub Hong Kong—but an electric-car sharing scheme starting next month is a first step to changing that.

Other places echo Singapore's approach—London has a congestion charge while Paris sometimes orders some private cars off the road due to air pollution—but they are unlikely to copy the city-state's tougher measures as it would be too risky.

"COE is not a very popular measure, and any government that tries to implement this kind of a measure in any other country may lose elections," Vivek Vaidya, a transport expert at business consultancy Frost and Sullivan, told AFP.

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