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Headline: Padilla's cable cars might have promise

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THE suggestion of Sen. Robinhood Ferdinand "Robin" Padilla to add cable cars to the transportation mix was initially met with chuckles, admittedly even from some people in this newspaper. Memes about his comments circulated in social media, including one with cable cars dangling from electrical wires and another with passengers clinging from the outside like Filipinos do on jeepneys. But despite the comic reactions, the idea makes sense to those looking for serious solutions to traffic congestion in Metro Manila and elsewhere around the country.

Mr. Padilla may have drawn inspiration from what he has seen abroad. Commuter cable cars are used for public transportation in other countries. But as pointed out by some experts who had reacted negatively to the senator, that mode of transportation is usually seen in areas with hilly or mountainous landscapes, like San Francisco that uses trolleys and Medellin, Colombia, that has elevated cable cars.

Those experts seem unaware of commuter cable cars that are also used in flat terrains. Mexicable and Cablebús operate in and around Mexico City, which is in a valley. In London, the cable car system that locals call the Dangleway carries people across the River Thames. And closer to home in Singapore, a gondola lift transports people from near the city center to Sentosa Island.

Mr. Padilla might have been taken more seriously if he had mentioned that cable cars were actually studied by the Duterte government. In 2018, the Department of Transportation looked into a 4.5-kilometer cable car system to connect the Santolan Station of the Light Rail Transit 2 in Marikina City to Barangay Rosario in Pasig City. In fact, the French government had provided assistance for the technical study, which was later forwarded to the National Economic and Development Authority. The senator might want to ask for an update on that.

Simultaneous

Those poking fun at Mr. Padilla might want to review what he actually said in the Senate. Before mentioning cable cars, he praised trains as an excellent mode of transportation. His point about "ropeway" was framed as a complement to railway and perhaps other conventional systems.

With that, the senator made a valid point. Traffic congestion should be resolved by developing several transportation modes. In previous editorials, for example, this paper suggested revisiting river ferries that connect with bus and railway terminals around Metro Manila. There are bodies of water that can be used for public transportation, such as Pasig River, Laguna de Bay and even Manila Bay.

Many people have also suggested developing bike and walking lanes. And some have said the light rail administrators should buy more railway cars to increase carrying capacity and reduce waiting time for passengers. None of these is incompatible with cable cars.

Moreover, ongoing transportation projects, particularly the subway, should continue. The authorities should also push ahead with rural economic development and improving digital connectivity in provinces, as these mitigate the traffic problem by slowing down urban migration. And government and private enterprises should be encouraged to allow some staff to work from home, if that arrangement is suitable.

Incidentally, cable cars or aerial tramways also should be considered outside Metro Manila. For instance, it could connect Antipolo City with the lower parts of Rizal province, or be used in Baguio City, which has been struggling with traffic congestion, especially during holidays. After all, traffic congestion is not limited to the National Capital Region (Metro Manila).

Granted, limited financial resources require setting priorities, and that might be a reason to oppose the idea. Then again, the cost of traffic congestion had ballooned to P5.4 billion daily, based on a 2018 Japanese study. Plus, people are looking at ways to reduce carbon dioxide emissions, which contribute to climate change.

Given the economic losses and other problems related to traffic congestion, the country cannot afford to undertake just one initiative at a time. The government should develop several simultaneously, some of which could be publicly funded while others could be pursued in partnership with the private sector. And following Mr. Padilla's lead, the authorities should, as they say, think out of the box.