# Pragmatic ways for PUV plan

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Transport group Manibela kicked off this week a three-day strike to protest the implementation of the contentious public transport modernization program, inconveniencing hundreds of commuters and forcing schools and universities to cancel face-to-face classes.

This disruption has played out far too many times over the roughly eight years since the policy decision was made to replace the antiquated but beloved jeepneys with cleaner, more efficient and environment-friendly public utility vehicles.

And it is a familiar scene will likely be repeated yet again unless the government and the jeepney operators and drivers come together to once and for all to iron out the kinks that have caused the project’s implementation to sputter, thus preventing its promised benefits from being unleashed.

Secretary Vivencio Dizon’s takeover of the driver’s seat at the Department of Transportation (DOTr) has raised expectations that the program will come to fruition, without saddling the jeepney drivers and operators with unnecessary financial burdens or robbing them without their primary source of livelihood.

This, as Dizon said acknowledged that the striking transport groups have legitimate concerns that first need to be addressed; primarily the issue of cost of the modern jeepneys, ranging from P1.7 million to P3.3 million, that is out of reach of most drivers and operators.

## Euro 4-compliant engine

Majority of the jeepney operators and drivers have said from the beginning that they are not opposed to modernizing their jeepneys because they also want to benefit from the safer, cleaner, and more fuel efficient vehicles.

But the average modern jeepney that is being required to replace the old jeepneys—with at least a Euro 4-compliant engine to bring down harmful emissions and at the same time provide commuters with a “more dignified, humane [system], on par with global standards”—is deemed far too expensive.

This has been the main reason why the program launched in 2017, which called for not just the use of modern jeepneys but the consolidation of the jeepney operators and owners into cooperatives to access financing as well as the rationalization of jeepney routes so that not too many jeepneys are out on the road, has been met with repeated delays, protests, and deadline extensions.

The Marcos administration had set a deadline for consolidation application for Dec. 31, 2023, but agreed to an extension of April 30, 2024, after which those who would fail to consolidate would no longer be given a franchise and thus be declared colorum or illegal. But again, this deadline was moved to Nov. 29 last year.

## Innovative solutions

But as of the last count, the Land Transportation Franchising and Regulatory Board had said that a high 86 percent of public utility vehicles nationwide had already consolidated, a figure hotly contested by Manibela on grounds that LTFRB grossly misrepresented the consolidation figures of PUV operators and drivers, and therefore gives the illusion that their concerns had been largely addressed when the opposite is more true.

On the primary issue of cost, Dizon and DOTr could consider the proposal of Senate President Francis Escudero for the department to “go out of its way” to come up with innovative solutions with the help of other government agencies and even the private sector so that the jeepney operators and drivers can more easily make the difficult transition.

“We can extend the amortization period and offer low interest rates. Let’s make it easier for those who agreed to consolidation,” Escudero said.

Addressing these valid concerns—instead of resorting to punitive action—will ensure the buy-in of the greater majority people who will be directly affected by the modernization program so that there will be no more question about which direction the government is going.

Dizon had already said that modernization was a “no brainer,” but acknowledged that the transport groups have “legitimate concerns” that the government must resolve.

## Pragmatic approach

The DOTr chief can readily build on the progress already made by his predecessors, as most of the major transport groups have already expressed their full support for the modernization program.

Pasang Masda president Obet Martin has urged Dizon not to suspend the modernization program and suggested that the government should fix the problems during its implementation.Such a pragmatic approach is needed because any major change such as the public transport modernization program comes with the inevitable pains and not everyone will be happy. But it is a reform that must push forward to provide Filipinos with more convenient and environment-friendly public transportation.

The government must engage with the affected sectors with the clear and sincere intention to address the grievances and push for the early implementation of the vital program. It should not allow the modernization program to be derailed by certain sectors that do not want the change to take off in the first place.