
Singapore: The Smartest City on Our Planet

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Many cities in the world are now aspiring to be “smart cities”. Only one city on our planet can aspire to be the “smartest city”. That city is Singapore.

Why is Singapore unique? It is the world’s only city-state. If the city fails, Singaporeans have no countryside to fall back to. We have no other option to fall back on. We have to keep our little city living and breathing. This is why from very early in our history, our founding fathers recognised that our little city-state could choke and die if we allowed too many cars on Singapore roads. If Singapore were full of traffic jams like Bangkok or Jakarta, its economy would grind to a natural halt. We would die just like any human being who tried to swallow too much.

Reducing Singapore’s car population is therefore a matter of life and death for Singapore. It is a necessity, not an option. Yet, Singapore now has an amazing opportunity to turn this necessity into a virtue. We can become the first city in the world to announce a zero car ownership society.

To get to this noble objective, the population of Singapore must accept an undeniable fact. A car is not a god to be worshipped. A car is an instrument to get us from place to place. Human beings rationally change their instruments when technology improves. When I was young, I took rickshaws because they were cheap and reliable. Later I took motorised taxis because they were cheap, reliable and fast.

Today, the best instrument to get us from place to place in a cheap, reliable and fast manner is a smartphone. Virtually, all Singaporeans now own a smartphone. Therefore, what Singapore needs now is a fleet of cars that will respond immediately to their smartphone app and get them from point to point. Our current generation of leaders now have a unique opportunity to match the political courage of our founding fathers who dared to create disincentives for car ownership.

We can match their political courage by now creating a set of incentives to switch away from car ownership. Hence any car that is brought in for use by smartphone apps to get from point to point need not pay the usual additional car taxes or purchase a COE. This would make renting a car for individual rides far cheaper than owning a car. Behavioural economics teaches us that people are smart. With the right

set of incentives, they will change their behaviour. With the right set of incentives, Singaporeans will stop worshipping cars and start using cars.

However, the incentives need not be economic alone. Singaporeans are normal human beings. They also have altruistic motives. If they are given a chance to save our fragile planet with no personal sacrifice (and indeed they should gain in economic terms), they will happily do so, especially when they see the world admiring the Singapore population for its boldness. By switching away from car ownership to car-ridership, we would reduce the number of cars on Singapore's roads from 900,000 to 300,000.

When that happens, the seven billion citizens of planet earth will look at us with great admiration and say with greater sincerity and conviction, "Singapore is the smartest city on our planet."