



**A family ponders its options on Saturday outside a closed MTR exit in Admiralty, as long lines form in Sheung Shui after the unprecedented shutdown.**

AFP/VOH/D RASMAN/ANTHONY WALLACE



## LET'S NOT GO OFF RAILS WITH THE JEWEL OF HK

Recent incidents on the Mass Transit Railway have reawakened my memories of this world-class system that has served our community for 40 years.



### Nuts and bolts

Edmund Leung

The first line started operating in 1979, and this autumn is when the MTR Corp should celebrate its 40th anniversary.

What staff did not expect to see is the sustained campaign of damage and disruptions being wreaked on the MTR.

Some of us may focus on the "engineering failures" that have occurred recently and blame the organization for their less than perfect management.

While the jury is still out on these issues, may I point out other cold facts that ensures our MTR remains to be one of the best railway systems in the world?

I do not use this description lightly, and it is not my job to sing praises of this transport facility. But having worked on almost all stages of this system in my career, both in design and construction activities from the 1970s until recently, I can claim some knowledge.

Did you know it is the first system with air-conditioning in all underground stations and platform screen doors?

Indeed, the MTRC pioneered this system, which provided not only comfort in all seasons but also enhanced safety and energy savings to all.

Without screen doors, we would be wasting a lot of energy as the cooled air would leak into tunnels.

Those of us who have traveled in London and New York, among others, in summer will understand what I mean.

Did you also know that this is one of the very few transport facilities that actually makes a real profit?

Some may argue that this is because the government has funded it by giving it land rights for property development.

The truth is that, though land rights were granted, the company pays full land premium to obtain its rights.

This railway-plus-land model, again

a world first, allows new lines to be built without undue burden to public coffers.

Living on top or near a station allows quick and comfortable commuting. I am told many people who live near MTR stations no longer use umbrellas.

They also commute without worrying about inclement weather and traffic jams.

Speaking of jams, we must remember the MTR system carries about half of our daily public transport volume, which in turn accounts for over 90 percent of total transport needs.

Each train coach can carry some 300 passengers, so an eight-car train can carry 2,400 passengers. The East Rail Line, with its 12-car trains, can carry a lot more.

At a headway of less than two minutes during peak hours, this translates to over 70,000 passengers each way per hour.

In comparison, one lane on roads can accommodate about 1,000 vehicles per hour. Even if most of these vehicles are buses, carrying 200 passengers each, the throughput capacity is vastly different.

Besides, there will never be adequate space on roads to cater for the 10 million commuter journeys made each day.

When the MTR system stopped running on Saturday, the disruption was community wide.

Let us pause and consider the value and service this jewel of Hong Kong has rendered.

As some of us criticize it for its lack of reliability, please remember that this is still one of the most reliable railway systems in the world.

Along with other public facilities, this is what makes Hong Kong one of the most efficient cities in the world.

**Veteran engineer Edmund Leung Kwong-ho casts an expert eye over Hong Kong's iconic infrastructure**