

【Asia】

Managing Bangkok's Road Transport:

Laws, Policies, and Institutional Roles

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1. Introduction

When it comes to navigating Bangkok's bustling streets, buses are the backbone of the city's road-based public transport system. Yet, despite their critical role in connecting millions of residents to work, school, and daily activities, Bangkok's bus services remain deeply underdeveloped. Why has such an essential service fallen behind? This question opens the door to a host of issues—poor planning, overlapping and redundant routes, uncoordinated operations, and a reactive, demand-driven approach that prioritizes short-term fixes over sustainable, long-term solutions.

At the root of these challenges lies a tangled web of governance, where the roles and responsibilities of central and local government agencies remain frustratingly unclear. This lack of coordination not only stalls progress but also leaves millions of commuters grappling with inefficiency every day. By focusing on buses, this article zeroes in on a system that touches the lives of so many yet suffers from systemic neglect. We aim to uncover the barriers holding Bangkok's buses back and explore the reforms needed to propel this vital service into the future.

2. Key Laws and Institutions Governing Public Bus Services

The primary legal framework governing public bus services in Thailand is the Land Transport Act B.E. 2522, which regulates large commercial vehicles used for transporting passengers and goods, with specific provisions for bus operations. The act aims to ensure efficient, safe, and fair land transport services while addressing traffic issues and supporting economic and public needs. Key areas of governance include vehicle registration, licensing of drivers and operators, route approvals, fare regulation, the establishment of service standards, and the determination and inspection of vehicle safety standards, alongside enforcement through penalty provisions. To achieve these objectives, the act mandates the establishment of the Land Transport Policy Committee, which is responsible for formulating both long-term and short-term land transport policies.

Complementing this, the Commission for the Management of Land Traffic Act was introduced to establish standards for road traffic management and effectively address road traffic issues. To achieve these objectives, the act mandates the creation of the Committee for the Management of

Land Traffic (CMLT), which is responsible for policymaking, planning, proposing law amendments, coordinating among stakeholders, and implementing traffic management strategies.

In terms of institutions governing land transport, the Office of Transport and Traffic Policy and Planning (OTP), under the Ministry of Transport, is tasked with developing national transport policies and plans, with its director serving as the secretariat of the CMLT. Similarly, the Department of Land Transport (DLT), another agency under the Ministry of Transport, oversees operational aspects such as route designation, fare regulation, and service standards. The DLT's role in route designation implies its

potential role in bus network planning, further highlighting its central role in shaping the public bus system. Additionally, the director of DLT serves as the secretariat of the Land Transport Policy Committee, linking its operations closely with broader policy decisions. The Bangkok Mass Transit Authority (BMTA), established as a national state-owned enterprise, is tasked with operating public transport services in Bangkok. Meanwhile, the Bangkok Metropolitan Administration (BMA) is mandated to oversee activities related to traffic engineering and transportation within the city, which possibly includes the bus operation activities.

Table 1 Key Laws and Institutions Governing Public Bus Services

Law	Organization	Roles and Responsibilities (related to bus services)	Reference
Land Transport Act B.E. 2522¹	Land Transport Policy Committee	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Formulates short-term and long-term land transport policies for submission to the Cabinet. 2. Develops and proposes policies on transport station operations to the Cabinet. 3. Sets measures and plans for land transport development for Cabinet approval. 	Section 14
	Land Transport Control Committee	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Establishes operational and service standards, such as: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Designates routes, number of operators, and vehicles for bus transport within Bangkok, between provinces, and internationally. - Determines transport and service fares. - Specifies stops or pick-up/drop-off points for passengers. 	
Commission for the Management of Land Traffic Act, B.E. 2521²	Commission for the Management of Land Traffic (CMLT)	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Proposes policies and master plans to the Cabinet. 2. Reviews and approves plans, projects, and budgets. 	Section 5

Law	Organization	Roles and Responsibilities (related to bus services)	Reference
		3. Sets standards for land traffic systems management.	
		4. Develops measures to address land traffic issues.	
		8. Recommends amendments to traffic-related laws or regulations.	
Ministry Regulation on Department of Land Transport Structure B.E. 2552	Department of Land Transport (DLT)	1. Implements laws related to land transport.	Clause 2
		2. Promotes and develops land transport networks.	
		3. Organizes and regulates land transport systems.	
Ministry Regulation on Office of Transport and Traffic Policy and Planning Structure B.E. 2558³	Office of Transport and Traffic Policy and Planning (OTP)	1. Conducts studies and analyses to develop master plans and investment strategies for national traffic and transport.	Clause 2
		2. Recommends policies, measures, and standards for land traffic systems management.	
Bangkok Metropolitan Administration Administrative Organization Act B.E. 2528⁴	Bangkok Metropolitan Administration (BMA)	1. Conducting activities related to traffic engineering and transport activities within Bangkok.	Section 89
The Royal Decree Establishing the Bangkok Mass Transit Authority B.E. 2519⁵	Bangkok Mass Transit Authority (BMTA)	1. Operates public bus transport services within Bangkok.	Section 6
		2. Contracts or subcontracts for passenger transport services.	Section 7
		3. Sets fare rates.	
		4. Engages in joint ventures for the benefit of BMTA operations.	

3. Unpacking Challenges in Public Bus Governance

Despite the detailed legal framework in previous section, the governance of public bus services in Thailand reveals significant complexity and confusion. There are overlaps in transport policy and planning duties, with unclear distinctions between the scopes of the

Land Transport Policy Committee and the CMLT, leading to redundancy in decision-making. Furthermore, the Land Transport Act has not undergone any significant changes for decades, continuing to rely solely on private operators as the primary providers of bus services with no support from the government.

The law fails to provide a clear mechanism for local governments to play a substantive role or for the state to directly operate or support public bus services. This ambiguity hinders the BMA, as a local government entity, from effectively managing bus service policy, planning, and operations. At the same time, it allows central government agencies to retain control and centralize these responsibilities, perpetuating inefficiencies in the governance and management of public bus services.

4. Policy and Planning for Public Bus Services at Central Government Levels

4.1 Policy discussion at the cabinet level

The policies related to public bus operations in Bangkok that have been proposed to the Cabinet have primarily focused on seeking approval for loans to support the financial liquidity of the BMTA and addressing its debt management, including the implementation of a rehabilitation plan for the organization. These proposals concerning the BMTA's debt are typically submitted by the State Enterprise Policy Committee through the Ministry of Transport and by the Public Debt Policy and Management Oversight Committee through the Ministry of Finance. While the BMTA rehabilitation plan has been a major focus of discussions within the State Enterprise Policy Committee, this issue has also been raised in the CMLT.

4.2 Policy discussion at the committee level

Despite the roles and responsibilities in transport policy and planning assigned to both the Land Transport Policy Committee and the CMLT by law, the CMLT functions as a more active and effective mechanism for proposing and driving policies and plans evident from its continuity and more frequent meetings.

By reviewing the minutes of the CMLT meetings, public bus services have been discussed in

various aspects, including the guided bus project, the public bus promotion project, the feasibility of bus routes, bus lanes, bus route reform, and the master plan for solving traffic problems in Bangkok. Notably, the latter two projects—bus route reform and the traffic master plan—have remained ongoing topics of discussion and continue to be addressed to this day.

4.3 Master plan for solving traffic problems in Bangkok

Although public buses should have played a significant role in the Master Plan for Solving Traffic Problems in Bangkok, the plan has primarily focused on expanding road infrastructure and increasing road capacity. While the promotion of public transport use is addressed within the plan, greater emphasis has been placed on urban rail services. Consequently, public buses have received lower priority, being relegated to a supporting role as feeders for urban rail networks rather than being positioned as a central component of the public transport system.

4.4 Proposal for bus network reform

The bus service reform project has been a topic of on-going discussion since 1995, with significant gaps in continuity. It resurfaced in 2015 alongside the BMTA rehabilitation plan, brought forward through the State Enterprise Policy Committee.

In 2016, the DLT conducted a study and proposed a new bus network, increasing the number of routes from 202 to 269. Of these 269 routes, 107 were designated for operation by the BMTA, while the remaining routes were to be licensed to private operators. The bus route reform encountered significant challenges in implementation. Some proposed routes failed to attract operators willing to run services, while the DLT lacked the legal authority and resources to implement the reforms effectively.

5. Local Government's Initiatives and Activities

The BMA has introduced several policy initiatives to improve public bus services. However, the implementation of some of these initiatives has faced significant challenges due to unclear delineation of responsibilities in existing laws and frequent intervention from the central government. Among these initiatives, three major projects stand out: the Bus Rapid Transit (BRT) system, the Bus Fleet Electrification program, and the BMA Feeder service. Each of these projects reflects BMA's efforts to enhance urban mobility, despite the obstacles posed by governance and institutional constraints.

5.1 Bus Rapid Transit

The BMA implemented a policy to operate the BRT system on dedicated bus lanes to provide public transport services in areas where the existing bus network could not adequately cover. The BRT system is managed by Krungthep Thanakom Company Limited (KT), a wholly owned subsidiary of the BMA that functions as its business arm, responsible for executing infrastructure and public service projects.

Despite its potential, the BRT project has faced significant challenges, including intervention by the central government. The Office of the Auditor General of Thailand raised concerns about the system's efficiency and cost-effectiveness, questioning whether the BRT project was a worthwhile investment. Additionally, it has been debated whether the BRT system aligns with the core responsibilities of the BMA. In 2014, the Office of the Auditor General of Thailand formally requested the BMA to review and reassess the BRT project, citing issues of financial sustainability and operational effectiveness.

This scrutiny reflects a broader perspective within the central government regarding public transport services, which are often viewed through a profitability lens—similar to how the BMTA has been evaluated. Such a mindset overlooks the potential social and environmental benefits of public transportation systems like the BRT, focusing instead on their financial performance, which may not always align with public service objectives.



Figure 1 The Bus Rapid Transit system on dedicated bus lane (BRT Satorn Station)

5.2 Bus Fleet Electrification

The BMA introduced a policy initiative to transition the city's public bus fleet to electric buses to improve service quality and reduce air pollution. In support of this initiative, the Bangkok Metropolitan Council approved a draft ordinance titled "The Bangkok Metropolitan Ordinance on Electric Buses to Reduce Pollution, B.E.". This ordinance stipulated that all buses operating in Bangkok must transition to electric vehicles within seven years.

However, upon review by the Council of State, it was determined that the BMA does not have the authority to enact such an ordinance. The responsibility for regulating public bus operations falls under the jurisdiction of the DLT, which is part of the Ministry of Transport.

Consequently, the proposed ordinance was deemed unenforceable.

This highlights the limitations of the BMA's authority in implementing citywide public transport regulations, despite its commitment to addressing environmental and service quality issues.

5.3 BMA feeder service

The BMA has successfully implemented the BMA Feeder service, designed to alleviate traffic congestion and improve public transportation accessibility. The BMA Feeder operates in areas that currently lack regular bus services (ex. Samsen Road, BTS Sanam Pao, ARL Lat Krabang, MRT Lak Song), effectively filling gaps in the city's transportation network. This initiative not only eases the burden on existing traffic systems but also enhances connectivity between neighborhoods and major transportation hubs, such as BTS and MRT stations. Importantly, the BMA Feeder service is provided free of charge, making it an accessible and attractive option for commuters while promoting the use of public transportation.

Notably, the BMA Feeder project stands out as one of the few successful initiatives by the BMA that has not faced intervention or criticism from the central government, allowing it to operate smoothly and achieve its intended objectives.



Figure 2 BMA Feeder (MRT Lak Song station)

6. Recommendations for Reform and Future Directions

To address the complex challenges in Bangkok's public transport governance, several reforms are essential. First, institutional roles and responsibilities must be clarified to eliminate overlaps and redundancies among agencies, such as the BMTA, DLT, and BMA. Legislative amendments could redefine these roles, empowering the BMA with greater authority to independently manage bus services, including policy development, implementation, and enforcement. Second, the integration of transport planning must prioritize a citywide approach, ensuring that buses are recognized as a core component alongside urban rail. Lastly, despite the existence of public-private partnership (PPP) programs, the role of the private sector tends to dominate, while the public sector should have a more significant role. Currently, the public sector's involvement is often limited to issuing licenses. This lack of active engagement is due to the absence of legal authority empowering local government agencies to participate more effectively in the PPP framework. These reforms require coordinated efforts between central and local governments to create a unified vision for Bangkok's public transport future.

<References>

- 1) The Land Transport Act was most recently updated in its 13th amendment in B.E. 2557 (2014).
- 2) The Commission for the Management of Land Traffic Act was most recently updated in its 2nd amendment in B.E. 2535 (1992).
- 3) The Ministry Regulation on Office of Transport and Traffic Policy and Planning Structure was most recently updated in its 2nd amendment in B.E. 2562 (2019).

- 4) The Bangkok Metropolitan Administration Administrative Organization Act was most recently updated in its 6th amendment in B.E. 2562 (2019).
- 5) The Royal Decree Establishing the Bangkok Mass Transit Authority was most recently updated in its 5th amendment in B.E. 2564 (2021).