

# [Khon Kaen mayor defends light rail project against meddling from Bangkok](#)

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KHON KAEN - The city of Khon Kaen stands poised to build the first urban light rail system outside of the nation's capital, but a tussle over who gets to construct and operate the metro trains is threatening to derail its arrival.

Despite cabinet approval for Khon Kaen Municipality to go ahead, the national Mass Rapid Transit Authority (MRTA) has made a bid to effectively take over the project. If the MRTA gets its way, the plan to solve the city's growing traffic problem might be delayed for years according to the people spearheading the project.

At a recent public hearing in Khon Kaen, most of the attendees sided with the municipality but a local anti-corruption group questioned the city's ability to keep the project free of fraud.

## **Locally-grown project**

The ballroom of the Pullman Khon Kaen Raja Orchid hotel was filled with about 500 members of the public. Few appeared to be younger than 30. Most were middle aged. Many others were past retirement age. Some came dressed for the occasion while others came dressed for the farm. Answering a call largely heard through online media and word of mouth, all had come to hear the latest news about the proposed Light Rail Transit (LRT) system and give their opinion on who gets to construct and run it.

Facing the audience was Khon Kaen Mayor Theerasak Theekayuphan, the elected chiefs of five municipal sub-districts and Suradech Taweesaengsakulthai, associate dean at Khon Kaen University's College of Local Administration (COLA). Conspicuously absent were representatives of the MRTA which had declined the mayor's formal invitation to attend the event.

"Think of the opportunities for our children and grandchildren," Mr. Suradech told the audience, stressing the long-term benefits of local ownership. As long as the project is locally owned, all LRT trains would be produced in Khon Kaen and there are opportunities for educational and vocational partnerships with colleges and universities, he argued.

Mr. Suradech leads Khon Kaen City Development (KKT), the public-private partnership behind the proposed LRT system. In 2015, the city and 20 local companies formed the corporation with a mission of realizing transit-led development without recourse to central government funds.



Khon Kaen Mayor Theerasak Theekayuphan (third from right) is concerned that the construction of the light rail system will be delayed for years if the MRTA takes over the project.

### **Surprise move**

After years of lobbying, Khon Kaen Municipality received approval from Prime Minister General Prayuth Chan-ocha and the cabinet to go ahead with the project. But in a surprise move, the Transport Minister and Director of MRTA, Arkhom Termpittayapaisit, made his own bid to the cabinet for the construction and operation of the project.

“Frankly, I was upset,” Mayor Theerasak confessed to the audience. “After all we’ve done from the very beginning, it felt like we were being gatecrashed.”

MRTA is bound by a national master plan to provide Phuket and Chiang Mai with LRT systems before it can address other provincial cities.

MRTA also depends on decrees, granted on a city-by-city basis, to build beyond Bangkok. At the hearing, people were asked to vote on whether or not MRTA should be granted a decree for Khon Kaen. It remains to be seen how the yet unknown outcome of the ballot will influence the cabinet’s decision to draft a decree for King Rama X to sign.

“It’s going to be at least nine years until we can fight it out with Hat Yai and Nakhon Ratchasima for third place on MRTA’s to-do list,” Mr. Suradech pointed out. “If we do this ourselves, we can ride those trains in just three years.”

## Concerns over corruption

But some members of the public were doubtful of Khon Kaen Municipality's qualifications. A representative of the Citizens Anti-Corruption Network raised concerns about corruption in local government.

"The Ministry of Interior is the most corrupt, and the most corrupt part of this ministry are the local administrations," said Tul Prasertsilpa, president of the group's Khon Kaen chapter. "We are taking a huge risk by allowing them to handle this project instead of MRTA, which already has the experience and know-how."

Throughout question time, the audience mostly reminded each other that the rest of Thailand is watching, and that Khon Kaen must seize this rare opportunity. "If the risk of corruption was a valid reason to not do projects like this, then nothing would ever get built in this country!" a man fired back at Mr. Tul.



Mr. Suradech warned the audience that none of the long-term benefits to local industry and education would be guaranteed under MRTA management of the light rail system.

The mayor soothed the crowd by reminding them that MRTA are just doing their duty as they see it, and that cooperation with MRTA should not be ruled out for any subsequent lines. But since MRTA can't say when they are going to start building in Khon Kaen, he would prefer to start immediately through KKTS rather than wait any longer.

In a passionate closing speech, the mayor warned citizens of having to start the whole process from zero if the national election is allowed to happen before a decision is made for Khon Kaen's LRT.

Mayor Theerasak also assured the audience that the project will not be managed by the local administration, but by a professionally run KKTS that will work with an international auditing firm.

“But I thank you for keeping me honest. Without people like you, society would be in trouble,” he added by way of reply to the anti-corruption campaigner.

Staff carrying ballot boxes began weaving through the room as the applause died down. The mood was resolute, yet tinged with uncertainty about the final word from Bangkok.