RTS Arrival & Johor Bahru CBD Transformation: A Dialogue

Insights from JC Kopi x CEREBRUM Insights

CEREBRUM by JCORP

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ABOUT JC Kopi x CEREBRUM Insights

JC Kopi x CEREBRUM Insights continues the Johor Conversations series led by CEREBRUM by JCorp with GovInsider since 2023.

In November 2025, CEREBRUM, GovInsider, and Johor Civil Service Academy (JCSA) signed an MoU with a clear ambition: strengthen public-private collaboration and unlock real opportunities. The priority is practical partnership in support of Johor's growth agenda across JS-SEZ, IBTEC, ECER, IIBD and related initiatives.

JC Kopi x CEREBRUM Insights is a direct execution platform of that ambition.

It brings operators, builders and decision-makers into the same room to surface real cross-organizational challenges; the issues everyone feels, but few discuss openly. The aim is to create a trusted environment where alignment can happen early, before time and capital are committed.

By identifying challenges before jumping to predefined problems, we reduce misdirected investments, accelerate decisions, and focus on solutions that are implementable and commercially viable.

The outcome we seek is simple:
better policies, sharper solutions, and clearer pathways to impact for Johor.

January Session 2026 Overview

On 15 January 2026, JC Kopi x CEREBRUM Insights, co-organized with GovInsider, convened a focused working session at Level 24, CEREBRUM, KOMTAR IIBD, moderated by Dr Umar Zakir Abdul Hamid, Head of CEREBRUM.

The session gathered ~20 public and private sector leaders as a continuation of the Johor Conversations; designed as an early, cross-functional engagement to surface real issues before policies and projects are locked in.

Focus of Discussion

The discussion centred on the practical challenge of enabling a next-generation Johor Bahru Central Business District (CBD), also referred to as the Ibrahim International Business District (IIBD), in the context of the upcoming RTS Cross-Border Shuttle, with focus on execution realities rather than aspirations.

Structured as a working meetup, not a panel or forum, the session created a safe space for candid exchange on operational constraints, institutional readiness, and coordination gaps between public intent and private execution.

Participants

State and federal agencies participated alongside private sector stakeholders.

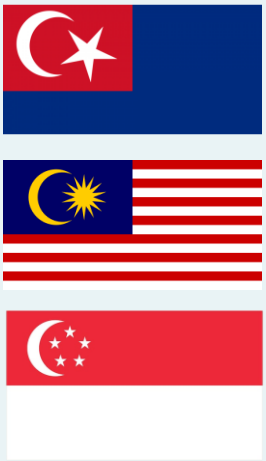
What's Next

Key outputs will be consolidated into a brief and used to anchor a more action-driven workshop in Q2 2026.

This marks the start of a continuing series.

~20

senior public and private sector leaders



State agencies, Federal agencies, local authorities, and private sector stakeholders

Strategic Context

*Infographics generated based on insights surfaced by participants of the JC Kopi x CEREBRUM Insights session in January 2026.

Regional Connectivity & Workforce Mobility

The RTS Link: A 5-Minute Cross-Border Connection

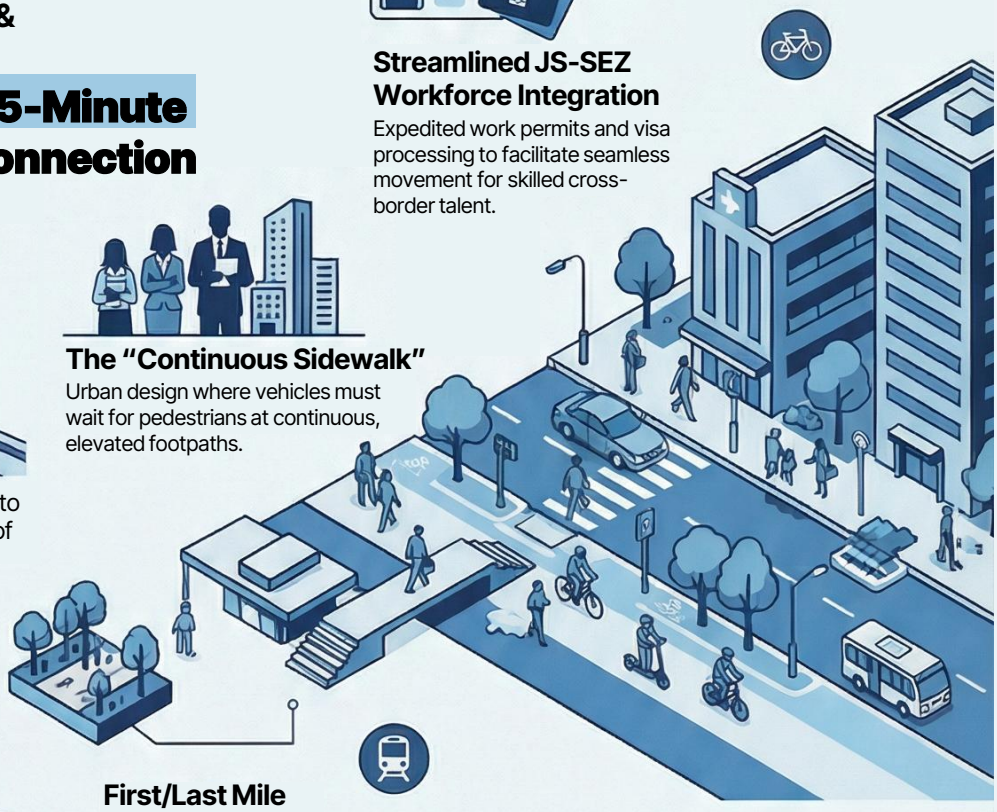
Direct rail link from Bukit Chagar to Singapore with a peak capacity of 10,000 passengers per hour.

Streamlined JS-SEZ Workforce Integration

Expedited work permits and visa processing to facilitate seamless movement for skilled cross-border talent.

The "Continuous Sidewalk"

Urban design where vehicles must wait for pedestrians at continuous, elevated footpaths.

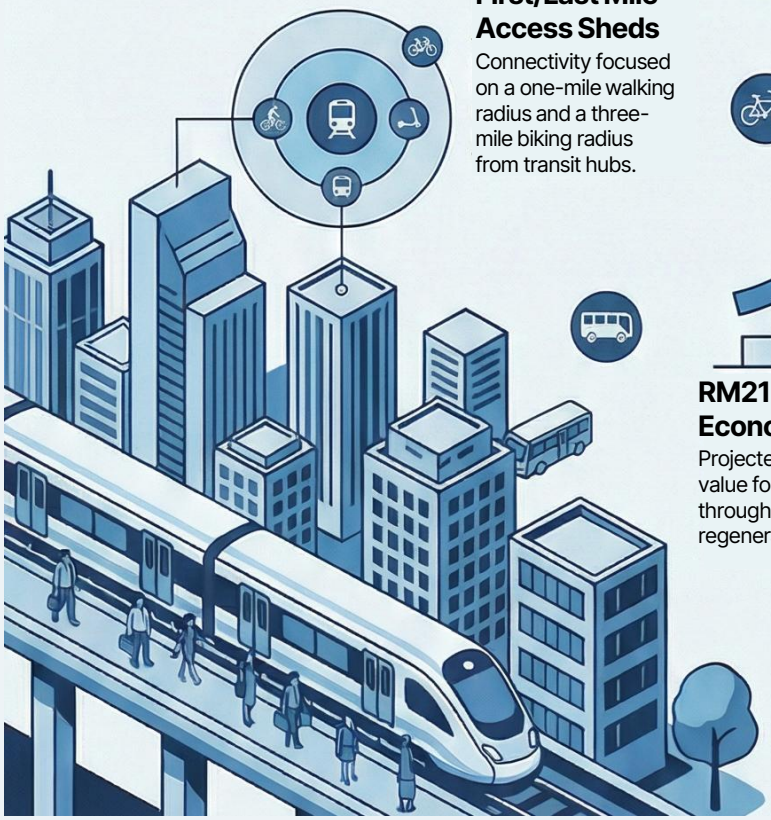


Smart Infrastructure & One-Sided Parking

Reallocating street space to enable wider footpaths and dedicated, separated bicycle lanes.

First/Last Mile Access Sheds

Connectivity focused on a one-mile walking radius and a three-mile biking radius from transit hubs.



The Infrastructure Multiplier Effect

RM21 Billion Economic Value Target

Projected growth in economic value for the district by 2040 through strategic urban regeneration.

Secondary Investment Catalyst

Mobility networks trigger private investments in retail, healthcare, and education services.

The Network Value Premium

Integrated transit networks can significantly increase property values compared to isolated facility investments.

Preface by Head of CEREBRUM

I believe dialogue is the starting point. Real conversations surface real constraints and real opportunities. But they require a platform that is safe, transparent, and constructive; bringing the right people into the right discussions, early enough for impact to be delivered on time.

Many complex challenges, and many outcomes that look "easy" on the surface; are the result of cross-organizational orchestration. They require people to talk to each other, take ownership, break problems down step by step, and stay accountable for outcomes.

This only works with continuous working-level collaboration, supported by leadership dialogue. Real input and honest feedback are essential; not just to solve today's issues, but to shape foresight and corrective actions for the next decade.

That is how we build systems that can predict, adapt, and evolve; rather than simply react.

This is where initiatives like JC Kopi x CEREBRUM Insights play a role. Not as a talk shop, but as a platform; where conversations are synthesized, orchestrated, and translated into actionable working groups. From there, we move forward step by step, together, co-shaping the future.

Building a stronger innovation ecosystem for Johor is not easy. But together, we will find the way.

Dr. Umar Zakir Abdul Hamid, EMBA
Head of CEREBRUM

ABOUT CEREBRUM

CEREBRUM is a think-and-do tank, next-gen growth platform.

Where ideas are **co-created** and **moved forward**.

CEREBRUM is dedicated to driving societal and commercial impact for Johor and the southern region, and operates via its two streams:

CEREBRUM Insights

CEREBRUM IMPACT

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CEREBRUM by JCORP

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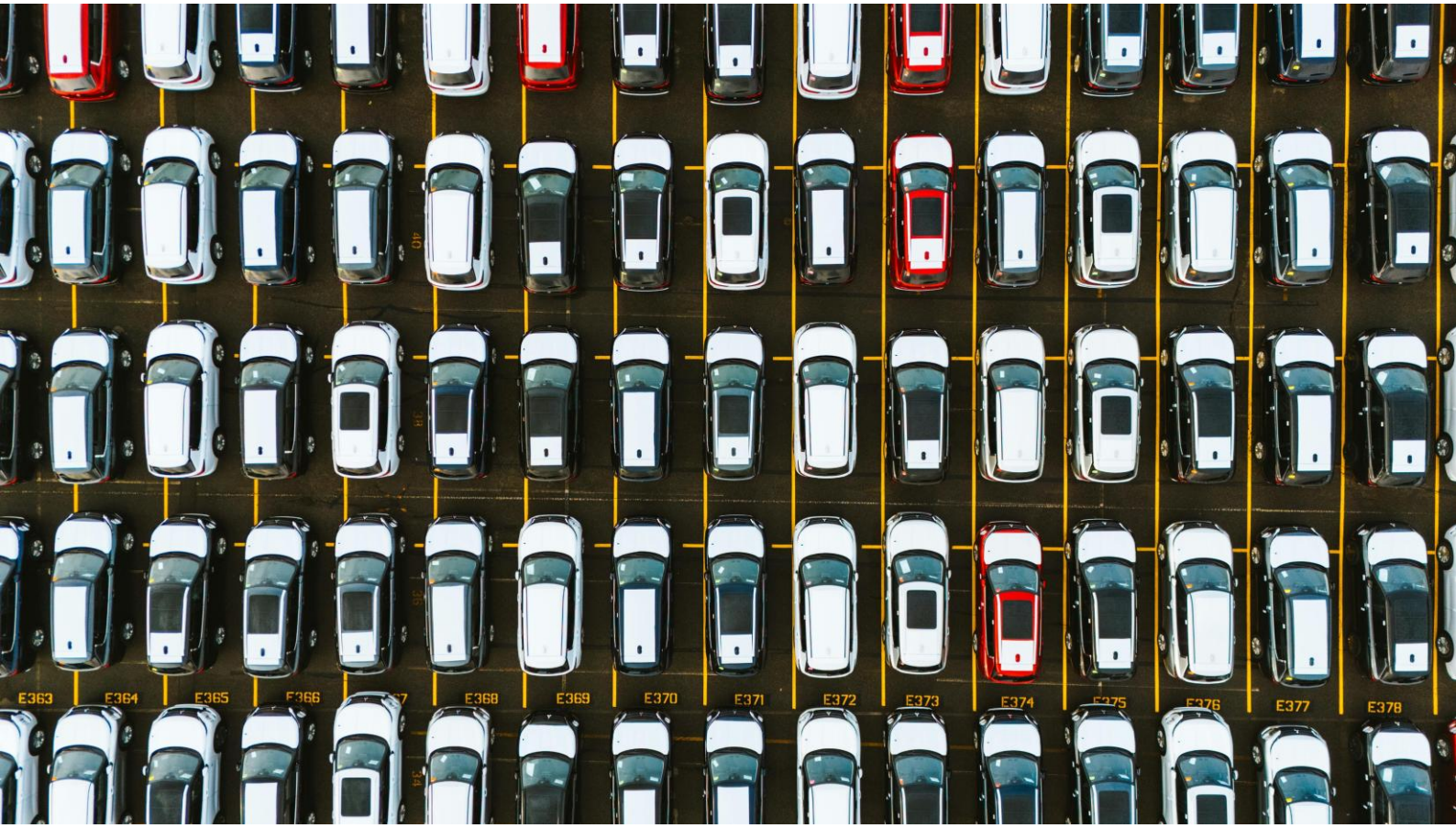
“Once operational, the RTS Link is expected to bring approximately 10,000 people per hour into the CBD. Managing this influx requires a robust, data-driven operational framework.”

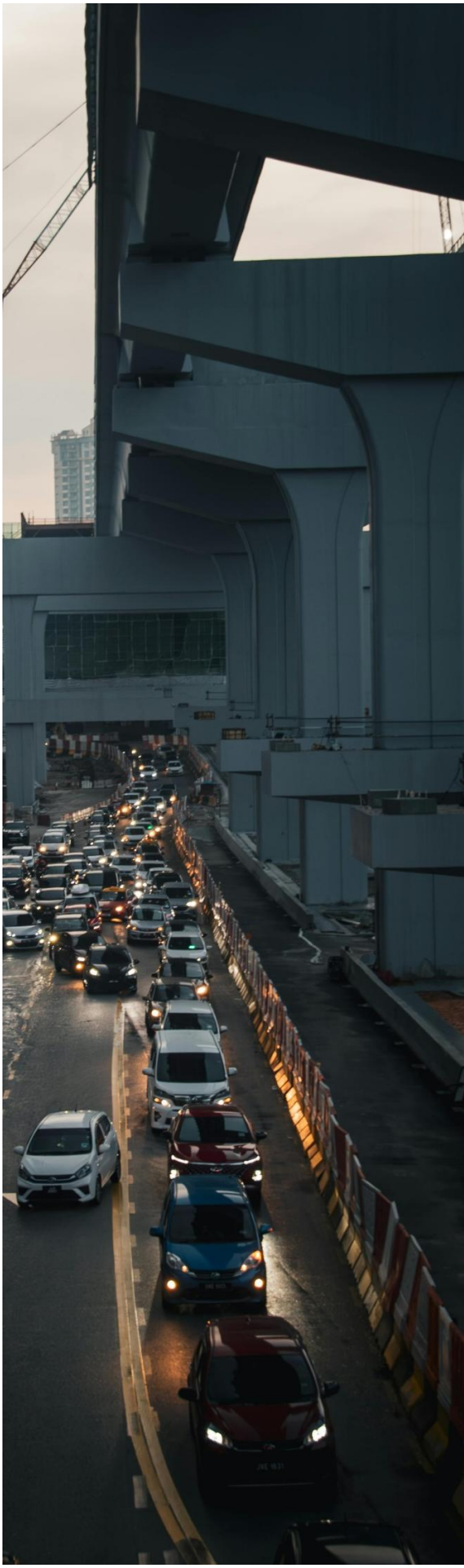
“The RTS fare structure will influence the system's effectiveness; if priced inappropriately, it may limit the shift of commuters from private vehicles to public transit.”

"Effective planning benefits from access to accurate data. Real-time systems and dashboards can support decision-making on topics such as EV infrastructure and investment attraction."

"RTS is an important node, but the broader question is how it can effectively address challenges without creating new ones. For example, traffic occurs when more vehicles enter a system than it can accommodate. The goal is not only to build a cross-border train, but to support a livable, functional CBD."



Executive Summary: Unlocking Next-Gen Mobility and Urban Dynamics in Johor Bahru CBD



The RTS is already defined. What we can do now falls into two horizons: short-term chokepoints and long-term preparation. Fixing chokepoints is necessary, but it is only a patch. What truly matters is starting to plan for the next decade.

While there may be short-term costs, laying the right groundwork now can help avoid larger future expenditures and create new opportunities.

Foresight must operate at the macro level. We need to move from reactive (responding after errors occur), to predictive (forecasting challenges ahead), and ultimately to prescriptive (anticipating what comes next within a finite horizon).

Therefore, the questions cannot be limited to mobility or urban planning alone. They should also consider the broader ecosystem. This begins with simple, seemingly unrelated questions such as:

- *Who experiences these cross-border challenges in their daily routines?*
- *What does their typical daily journey look like?*
- *How does the system being developed support their needs?*

During this JC Kopi session, more than 20 leaders from various stakeholder groups came together to discuss RTS arrival and its impact on the JB CBD across three phases: pre-deployment, during operations, and beyond RTS.

The response was clear. Stakeholders were engaged and expressed strong interest in having this platform organized again.

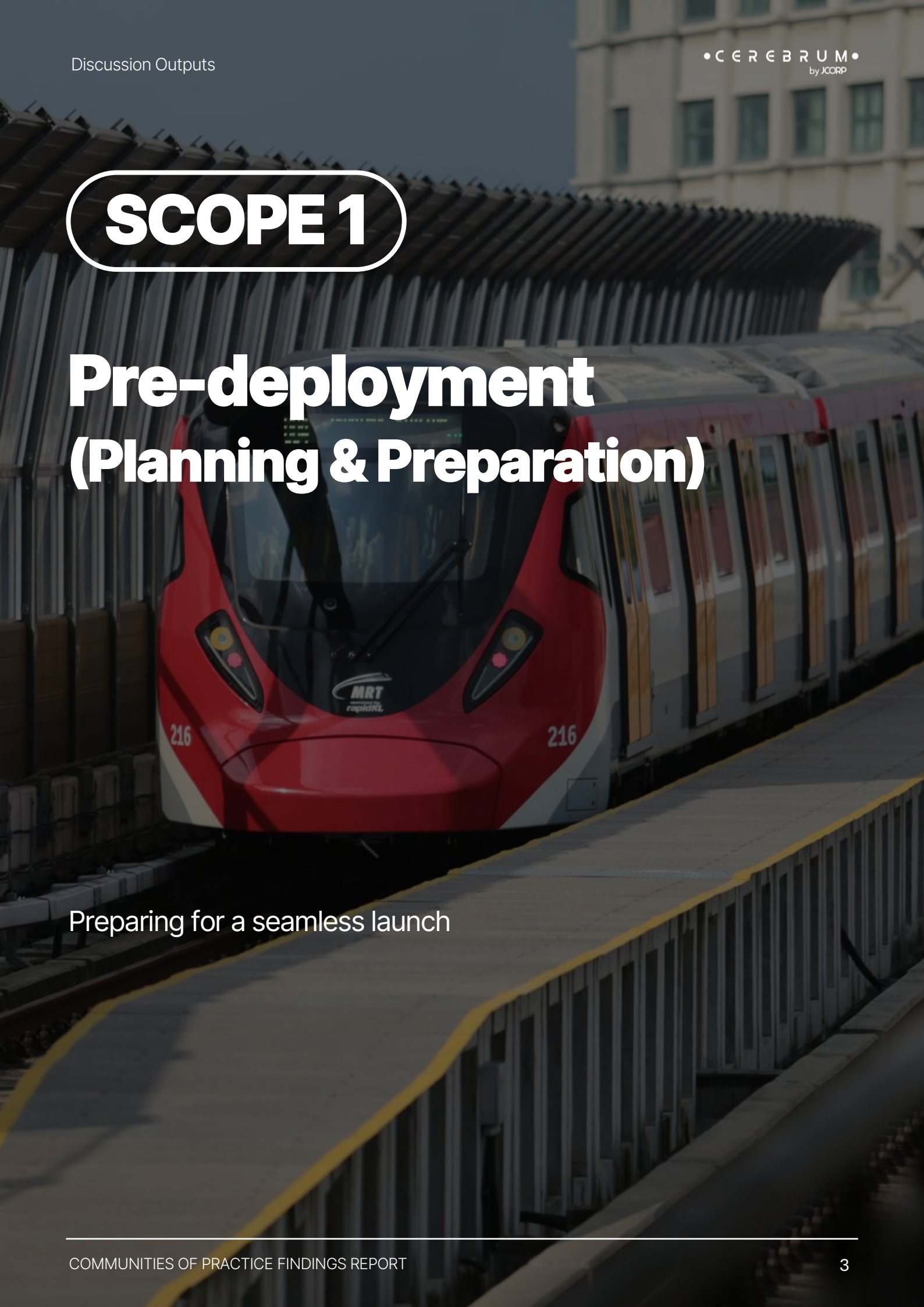
Key themes surfaced included the importance of a centralized data control tower for rapid refinement, the need to design future improvements based on real user and customer journeys from multiple perspectives, and the operational challenges that must be anticipated.

Not everything is captured in this report; and that is intentional.

The most important success factor was the creation of a safe space where innovation challenges can be voiced openly, and where stronger public–private–people partnerships can form. This program achieved exactly that.

To be clear, the purpose of this session was not to deliver a 100% solution.

It is the first step toward deeper, sustained engagement.



SCOPE 1

Pre-deployment (Planning & Preparation)

Preparing for a seamless launch

SCOPE 1

Pre-Deployment: Strategic Readiness and Infrastructure Alignment

The pre-deployment phase involves intensive infrastructure development and the finalization of policy frameworks.

A key consideration is the economic accessibility of the RTS Link.

Participants highlighted that the fare structure will influence the system's effectiveness; if priced too high, it may limit the shift of commuters from private vehicles to public transit.

Key Issues and Contextual Analysis

- **Fare Sensitivity and Modal Shift:**

  Recent reports indicate that the RTS Link is on track for completion by end-2026. However, as noted in the discussion, the "seamlessness" of travel is currently hindered by fragmented transport modes.

  Global urban mobility leaders suggest that for a modal shift to occur, the "generalized cost" of transit (fare + time + effort) must be lower than private car usage.

- **Infrastructure Chokepoints:**

  It was noted that relocating heavy vehicle (lorry) customs could help reduce congestion in the CBD.

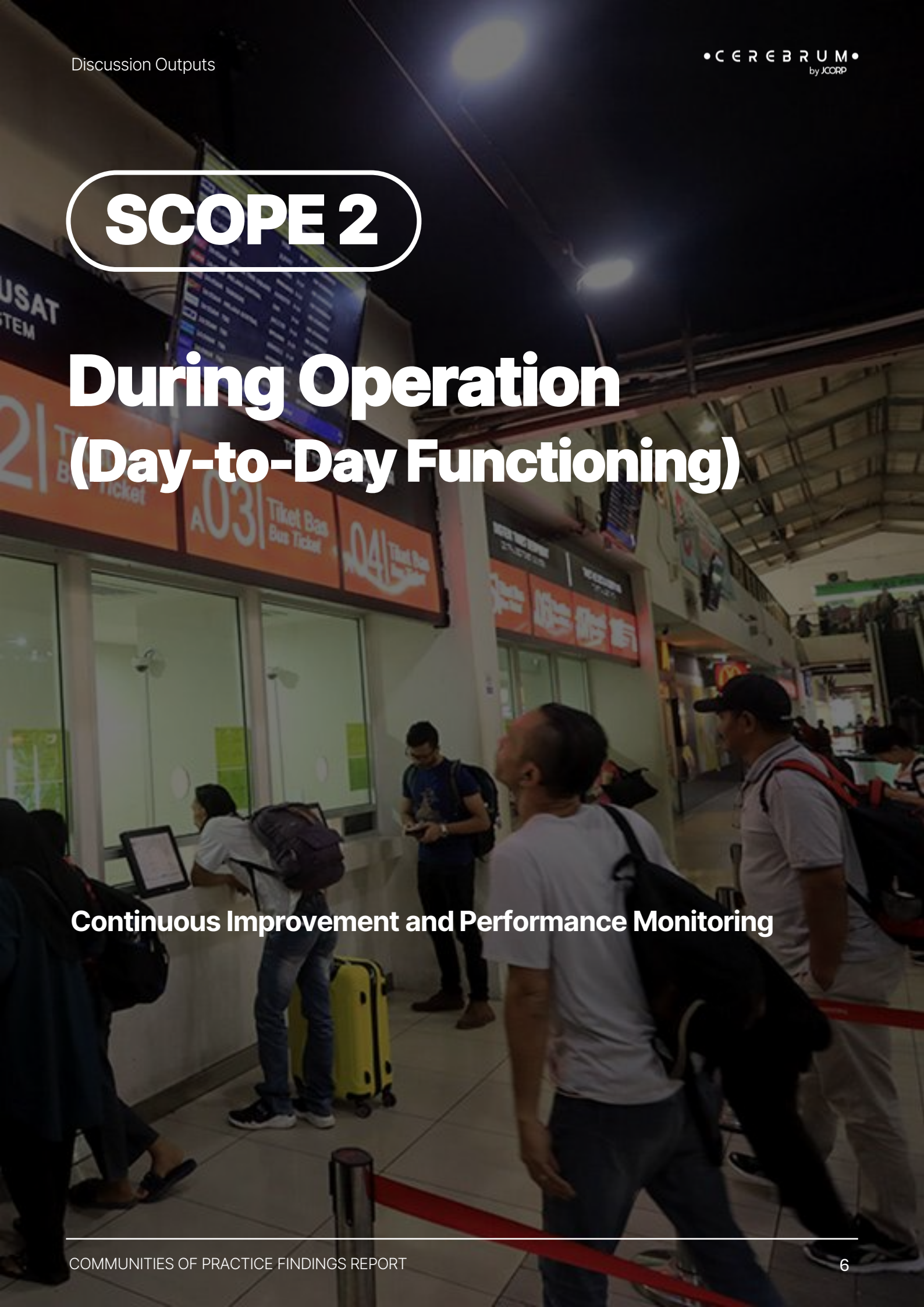
  This aligns with smart city strategies that segregate industrial logistics from urban passenger flows to improve road safety and pedestrian experience.

- **White Zone Implementation:**

  Johor is poised to be the first in Malaysia to implement "White Zones"—flexible land-use categories that allow for rapid adaptation to market needs.

  This flexibility is crucial for the CBD's evolution into a high-density, mixed-use hub.

Strategic Focus	Discussion Output	Supporting Context
Connectivity	Need for Pedestrian Overhead Bridges (POB) and seamless links.	New elevated bridges connecting Persada Johor and Komtar JBCC to JB Sentral are already taking shape.
Land Use	Introduction of flexible "White Zones" for CBD land.	Aligns with global trends in "Adaptive Urbanism" to future-proof city centers.
Logistics	Proposal to move heavy vehicle customs out of the CBD.	Essential for creating a "People-First" CBD environment.



SCOPE 2

During Operation (Day-to-Day Functioning)

Continuous Improvement and Performance Monitoring

SCOPE 2

During Operations: Data-Driven Governance and Smart Mobility

Once operational, the RTS Link is expected to bring approximately 10,000 people per hour into the CBD.

Managing this influx requires a robust, data-driven operational framework.

The Role of Data and Smart Systems

The discussion underscored a significant "blind spot": data silos. While MBJB has achieved Level 3 Smart City certification—the highest in Malaysia—and utilizes the Southmax integrated command center, data sharing across different agencies remains a challenge.

- Integrated Command Centers: The planned transition to a new smart parking system and deployment of smart traffic management solutions by mid-2026 are important steps toward enabling real-time traffic coordination.
- Demand Responsive Transit (DRT): To address the “last-mile” challenge, participants proposed DRT solutions (e.g., on-demand shuttles) that allow flexible, location-based bookings rather than fixed routes. This reflects a shift toward “Mobility as a Service” (MaaS) models observed in leading global cities.

Communication and feedback loop

There was also a discussion that RTS should serve as a catalyst for Johor's future direction, rather than addressing only current challenges. The broader ambition is for the ecosystem to operate cohesively, addressing not just RTS but larger-scale questions, such as how to mobilize people effectively and what the surrounding ecosystem needs to enable this. With this approach, Johor can move toward a more predictive and prescriptive state. Achieving this will require continuous cross-functional collaboration, with stakeholders regularly communicating and updating one another. Progress will take time, but this collaborative effort is important for long-term outcomes.

Role of the Control Tower: Mapping the User Journey and Tracking Performance

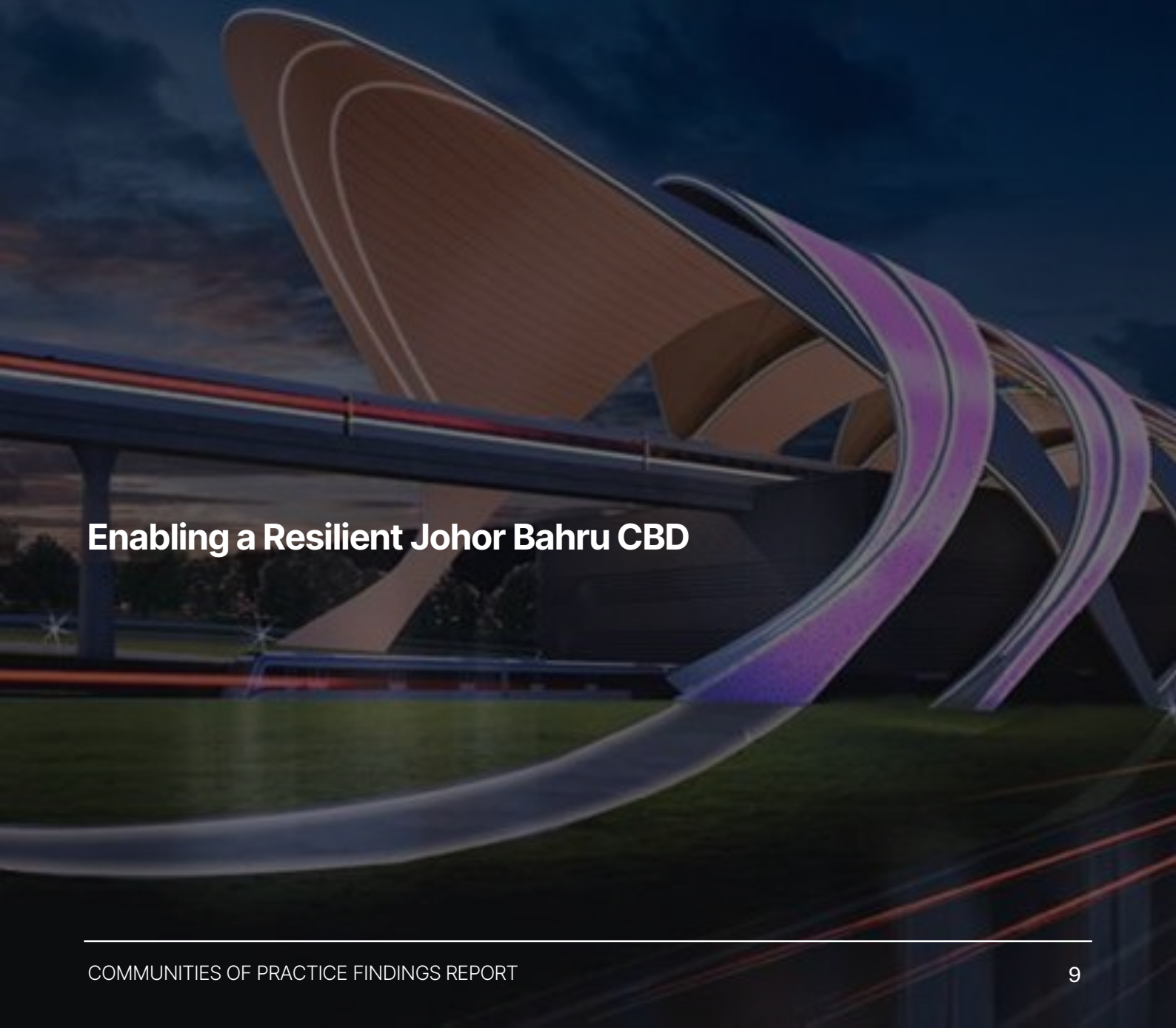
After RTS deployment, it is important to measure system usage comprehensively. The scope should extend beyond local Singapore–Johor Bahru commuters to include others benefiting from the broader ecosystem, such as tourists and international visitors.

For local users, not everyone working in Singapore resides in the JB CBD. Some may live as far as Kota Tinggi. Therefore, the end-to-end journey from Kota Tinggi to Singapore should be considered. X-mile transportation solutions are essential to support a better overall mobility experience.

In addition to individual journeys, the surrounding ecosystem contributing to congestion should also be addressed. For instance, customs flows for commercial vehicles near the JB CBD can add traffic pressure. Relocating these activities to alternative areas could reduce congestion and support first- and last-mile solutions, enabling smoother dispersal within the CBD.

SCOPE 3

Post-Deployment (Mature System & Scaling)



Enabling a Resilient Johor Bahru CBD

SCOPE 3

Post-Deployment: Mature System, Scaling & Beyond RTS

The Rapid Transit System (RTS) is now defined and nearing deployment. While short-term chokepoints (e.g., immediate traffic issues) can be patched, the real opportunity lies in planning for the next decade. Post-deployment must move beyond reactive fixes toward predictive and prescriptive urban and mobility solutions. This phase is about building a **mature, scalable system** that supports Johor Bahru's growth, enhances user experience, and integrates the wider ecosystem.

Understanding the End-to-End User Journey

1. **Beyond JB-SG commuters**

    - Not all RTS users live near the CBD. Some commute from distant areas like Kota Tinggi, while tourists and international visitors may also benefit from the system. Post-deployment must capture **all users**, not just locals.

2. **Seamless mobility experience**

    - First- and last-mile solutions are important. X-mile transport options (e.g., DRT, GrabShuttle, mini-bus services) should integrate with RTS to provide smooth journeys.

3 **Ecosystem perspective**

    - Congestion is influenced by multiple factors, including commercial vehicle flows, customs checkpoints, and urban planning constraints near JB CBD. Post-deployment assessment could explore whether adjustments to these elements improve overall traffic dispersal.

Data-Driven Decision Making

1. **Integrated real-time data**

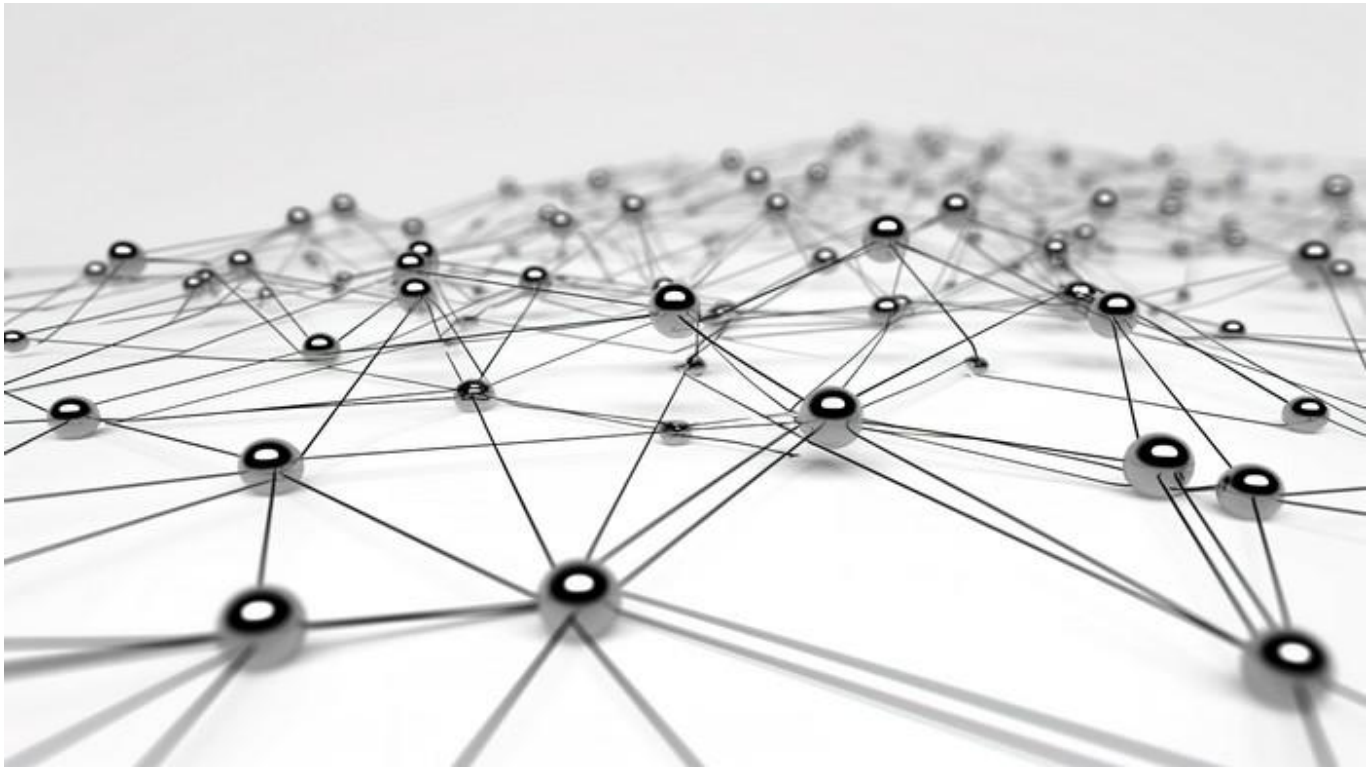
    - Urban observatories to provide centralized insights, with data held across multiple agencies. Post-deployment, clear mechanisms for data sharing can support timely and informed decision-making.

2. **Measuring usage & impact**

    - Track who is using RTS, travel patterns, peak loads, and mode transfers. Include **economic factors**, fare sensitivity, and demographic insights to predict adoption and adjust services accordingly.

3 **Predictive analytics**

    - Use data to forecast demand, congestion points, and required service adjustments. Transition from reactive monitoring to **predictive and prescriptive operations.**



Scaling the System

1. **Demand-responsive solutions**

    - Radius-based, on-demand shuttles and minibuses complement fixed RTS routes, enabling coverage in underserved areas and flexible routing.

2. **Supporting urban growth**

    - Coordinate land-use planning, flexible zoning (White Zones), and CBD infrastructure upgrades to match mobility patterns. Align RTS expansion with broader initiatives like JSSEZ, IBTEC, and ECER.

3 **Talent & workforce mobility**

    - Address workforce gaps, pay disparities, and commuting challenges. Post-deployment planning must consider the **impact of RTS on labor flows** and strategies to retain talent locally.

Operational & Policy Integration

1. **Infrastructure & policy alignment**

    - Post-deployment should integrate transport, urban planning, and policy interventions, including:
        - Pedestrian overpasses and vehicle lot management in the CBD
        - Flexible work hours to reduce peak congestion
        - Relocation of heavy vehicle flows to ease traffic
        - Review and potential reintroduction of LRT proposals for long-term capacity

2. **Cross-agency collaboration**

    - Encourage collaboration between MBJB, PAJ, PlanMalaysia Johor, and private partners to enable coordinated, ecosystem-wide interventions.

Looking Beyond RTS

1. **Macro-level foresight**

    - Plan for **10–20 years ahead** rather than short-term fixes. Consider traffic trends, land use, population growth, and international tourism flows.

2. **Commercial pathways & innovation**

    - Use RTS deployment as a platform for new mobility services, integrated payment systems, and partnerships that **unlock economic and social value**.

3. **Mature system outcomes**

    - Efficient, seamless mobility for all users
    - Data-driven decision making and predictive traffic management
    - Policy and infrastructure alignment for long-term growth
    - Scalable solutions that evolve with Johor's economy and demographics

Talent and Economic Dynamics

- **The Pay Gap Challenge:**

  The discussion noted a difference in compensation levels between JB and SG, with a potential talent shortage in JB post-RTS. The JS-SEZ aims to address this by encouraging Singaporean firms to establish operations in Johor, thereby reducing the need for daily cross-border commuting.

- **Work-Life Integration:**

  Proposals for flexible working hours and "live-near-work" incentives were discussed. In Singapore, housing grants for employees living close to their workplaces have helped reduce commuting distances—participants suggested this as a potential consideration for Johor.

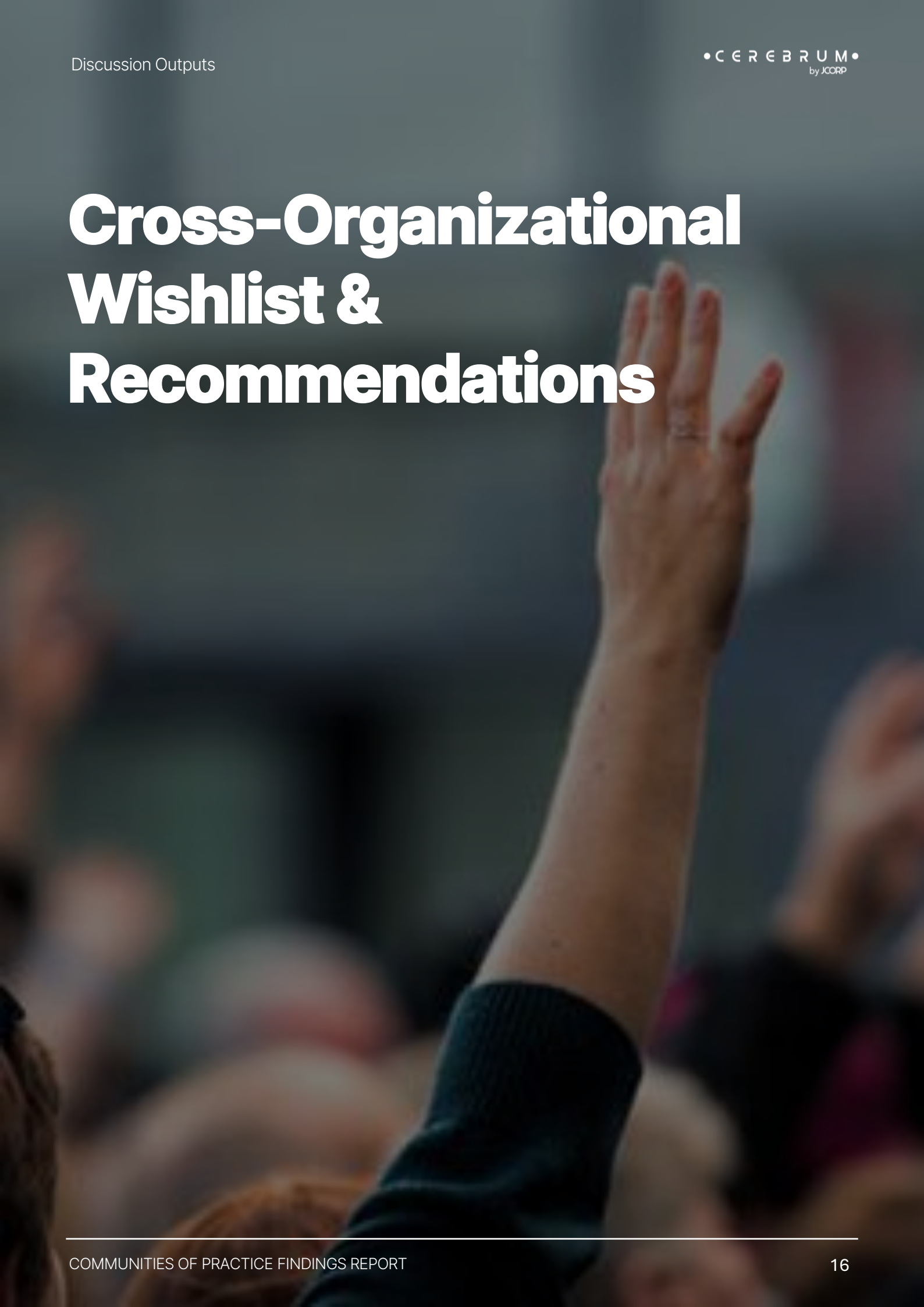
- **The Future of LRT:**

  While ART (Autonomous Rail Rapid Transit) and BRT (Bus Rapid Transit) are currently in focus, there is a strong call to revisit LRT (Light Rail Transit) proposals. Participants emphasized that Johor should plan proactively, including potential modifications to existing structures, to accommodate high-capacity rail for the future.

> "Invest now to secure long-term impact."

Post-deployment is not just about RTS operation; it marks the beginning of a mature, scalable, ecosystem-oriented transport and urban system that creates sustainable opportunities for Johor's residents, businesses, and visitors.

Cross-Organizational Wishlist & Recommendations



Actionable Wishlist and Recommendations

1. **Policy & Incentives:**

    - Implement "Live-Near-Work" housing policies to reduce CBD traffic.
    - Establish flexible working hour guidelines (e.g., Flexi-Fridays) to regulate peak traffic.
    - Finalize and gazette "White Zone" guidelines to encourage flexible CBD development.

2. **Infrastructure & Operations:**

    - Relocate Heavy Logistics: Consider shifting commercial vehicle customs operations away from the CBD to support smoother pedestrian and passenger vehicle flow.
    - Seamless Pedestrian Networks: Ensure the completion of all planned overhead bridges and covered walkways connecting the RTS station to key CBD landmarks.
    - Integrated Transport Hubs: Move express bus terminals near Senai to create a more distributed and integrated transport network.

3 **Data & Technology:**

    - Unified Data Platform: Create a neutral, cross-agency data-sharing platform to eliminate silos and enable real-time urban planning.
    - MaaS Expansion: Scale DRT and shuttle services to cover a wider radius around the RTS station.

Conclusion

The discussions at the **JC Kopi x CEREBRUM Insights** highlight a key insight: the Johor Bahru–Singapore Rapid Transit System (RTS) Link is more than a solution to cross-border congestion; it is a catalyst for a comprehensive urban and economic transformation of the Johor Bahru Central Business District (CBD).

The success of the RTS Link and the realization of the **Johor-Singapore Special Economic Zone (JS-SEZ)** vision depend on a critical shift: moving beyond hardware; the tracks and stations; toward deliberate investment in **soft infrastructure**.

This soft infrastructure rests on three pillars:

1. **Policy Innovation** – Initiatives like “White Zones” for flexible land use and “Live-Near-Work” incentives are crucial to reshape urban density and reduce reliance on private vehicles.

2. **Data-Driven Governance** – Fragmented agency data must be integrated via a neutral platform, leveraging existing smart city investments, to enable real-time, evidence-based decisions for traffic management and last-mile solutions such as Demand Responsive Transit (DRT).

3. **Human Capital Development** – Economic parity and talent retention are essential for JS-SEZ. Addressing the talent pay gap and building a high-capacity, multi-modal transport network; including revisiting the high-capacity LRT proposal’ will secure Johor Bahru’s future.

The session reinforced the principle of making strategic, forward-looking investments: short-term commitment and careful planning are necessary to transform the city from a transit hub into a vibrant, resilient, and talent-rich regional economic center.

In essence, designing a **future-proof, livable, and sustainable JB CBD** requires a **360° perspective**. Success depends not only on micro-level interventions but also on macro-level planning across citizen experiences (working hours, mobility, currency flows), urban development, and commercial logistics (e.g., customs and immigration locations for vehicles). Achieving this demands **continuous collaboration across all stakeholders;** government, private sector, and citizens alike.

Additional Reads

[1] *Johor State Data Centre Development Planning Guidelines, February 2025*.
https://jpbd.johor.gov.my/wp-content/uploads/2025/02/81-GP-DATA-CENTRE-en.pdf

[2] *ITMAX Smart Traffic Light System Contract for MBJB, July 2025*.
https://theedgemalaysia.com/node/764825

[3] *SBF JS-SEZ SBWG Recommendation Report, January 2024*.
https://www.sbf.org.sg/docs/default-source/advocacy-policy/sbf-research-reports/sbf-topical-research-reports/js-sez_sbwg-slides-2024.pdf

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