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The government's motivation is to help ease the burden of the rakyat. NSTP/Azhar Ramli

KUALA LUMPUR: The government's plan to take over four toll highways in the Klang Valley for a combined RM6.2 billion is seen as part of efforts to ease the burden of the rakyat, say experts.

The highways are Lebuhraya Damansara-Puchong(LDP), Sistem Penyuraian Trafik KL Barat Sdn Bhd (SPRINT), Lebuhraya Shah Alam (Kesas) and the Stormwater Management and Road Tunnel (Smart).

While the government has not announced the abolition of tolls, it has proposed a congestion charge system, where commuters will pay what's equivalent to the existing toll charges during the six-hour peak period daily.

In the proposal, during the off-peak period between 11pm and 5am, commuters can travel on the highways for free, while rates for normal hours will be discounted by up to 30 per cent.

Economist Datuk Wira Jalilah Baba supports the move as she sees the move as part of the government's effort to ease the burden of the rakyat.

"The government's motivation is to help ease the burden of the rakyat and we should support it.

"They cannot outright abolish the toll, but the proposal to give 30 per cent discounts for normal hours and toll free for off-peak hours is a huge move by the government to help the rakyat," she said.

Professor Dr Amiruddin Ismail of the Smart and Sustainable Township Research Centre (Sutra) of the Department of Civil and Structural Engineering of Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia (UKM) also echoed Datuk Wira's sentiment that the move would be a boon for the rakyat.

"While the government has promised to gradually abolish tolls in stages during last year's general election, it is impossible to do so because the need to maintain the highway is quite high.

"This move is the next best solution to keep that promise.

"By giving discounts during normal hours and free toll access at the off-peak hours, shows the government is making an effort to keep its promise to help the rakyat.

"I feel the government will only improve on that system so that the rakyat will benefit in the long run," he said.

Universiti Sains Malaysia (USM) senior lecturer in transportation engineering Dr Nur Sabahiah Abdul Sukor, meanwhile, sees both the pros and cons of the proposal.

"While pros is definitely the benefit to the rakyat there is also a cons to the move.

"This will cost the government a lot of money to buy these highways.

"At the moment the money can go to build more schools or improve existing schools.

"There may be other things at the moment that need that money.

"Maybe the government needs to explain a little bit more on what will happen after they take over.

"At the moment, their explanation is still not enough," he said.

Economist Dr Hoo Kee Ping, however, thinks the current move to buy the highways is not being made at the right time as it will scare away foreign investors.

"This step will be seen by foreign investors as a nationalisation of businesses in Malaysia.

"It will scare away foreign investors.

"The government should not rush into this, but it should look at the consequences in regard of foreign investors and how the international business community will look at this.

"This move will have a negative impact on the market.

"The people may be happy, but it will mean investors will be scared to invest in Malaysia," he said.

Transport expert Dr Law Teik Hua wants the government to be more cautious, because of the state of the country's economy.

"At the current economic state of the country, is it a good move to spend so much money on buying highways.

"Maintaining highways are not like maintaining the old trunk roads, it needs a higher quality of maintenance.

"This is why the tolls are needed for the companies to maintain the highways.

"Can the government take over the maintenance of the highways and maintain them at the quality needed?

"These are not normal roads. Even maintaining normal roads are expensive.

"The government needs to be aware of this or it could cause more problems in the long run," he said.