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Cross-channel link for Penang to airport

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PENANG, Fri. - Once the proposed superhighway and new cross-channel link are operational, mileage and travelling time from the proposed new airport to Penang would be cut down.

The length it would take to travel from the new airport to Georgetown would be 26km or a 20-minute drive at average speed.

It will 40 minutes to travel the 50km from Bayan Lepas Industrial Park to the airport.

The new highway is planned for completion before the proposed airport is completed. The airport is expected to be ready in eight to 10 years.

Presenting a blueprint of the proposed linkages at a news conference today, Chief Minister Tan Sri Dr Koh Tsu Koon said several options for the new highway and bridge linkage would be selected, depending on the feasibility and environmental impact assessment studies.

The proposed northern region international airport, to be built on a man-made island, will straddle the Penang and Kedah borders.

Although the configurations are now uncertain as to how much of the reclaimed land or proposed airport would be in Penang, Koh said the airport would be "many times" bigger than the Bayan Lepas International Airport even after its present expansion.

"Being the second largest airport in the country," Koh said, "it would facilitate more international flights into the region, provide greater passenger and cargo capacity and greater prosperity for Penang."

He was responding to Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad's statement that the Bayan Lepas International Airport in Penang would have to be closed down and used for other purposes.

Dr Mahathir had said in Jitra yesterday that as compensation for closing down the Bayan Lepas airport, the major reclamation work to be carried out off the Kedah coast would be extended to cover Penang as well.

The new multi-million ringgit linkages will be built for easy access to air passengers and cargo facility users, especially from the industrial estates.

This was to ensure that even if the Bayan Lepas International Airport was closed, there would always be an airport to service Penang. Koh said Penang island would be linked directly to the new airport by a new superhighway linked by a bridge or an undersea tunnel.

He said he was glad for Penang that the Prime Minister had accepted the proposal to have part of the proposed new international airport located in Penang, linking Georgetown and Penang island directly to the new airport.

Koh submitted the proposal to Dr Mahathir on July 24, a few days after the Prime Minister returned from his two-month vacation abroad.

However, Koh said his proposal had been planned much earlier.

Asked if he had discussed it with Kedah Menteri Besar Tan Sri Sanusi Junid, Koh said "Yes" but declined to say what Sanusi's reaction was.

Asked about the Bayan Lepas International Airport and the announced plan to spend RM100 million on its expansion, Koh said this would continue.

The construction of the new Malaysia Airport Bhd air cargo complex and the extension of the passenger terminal at the airport will also continue as scheduled.

On whether the Bayan Lepas International Airport would be closed and to what use it would be put in that eventuality, Koh replied:

"It may or may not be closed down. There will be new uses and there are

several possibilities," he said. "But definitely, the airport will be used at least for the next eight to 10 years."

The Bayan Lepas airport was built in 1935. Today, it has 10 aircraft parking aprons able to accommodate Boeing 747s. Nine passenger airlines and 10 cargo airlines use the airport.

Last year, 2.9 million passengers used the airport and 101,000 tonnes of cargo passed through it.

Asked if the possible closing of the Bayan Lepas airport was a setback for him and the State, Koh said: "I respect the Prime Minister's decision."

Pressed for his feelings about the airport's closure, Koh said: "As a Penangite, I feel sad that a facility that has so long been in Penang may be closed. But my feeling is secondary."

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