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Ongoing promotion efforts attracting more investors

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AS everyone is well aware, the visionary Multimedia Super Corridor project is still at its embryonic stage.

This human-like description for the national initiative is also most apt, for - as with a baby yet unborn - a multitude of expectations have already been laid on it.

And, like the mother-to-be just coming to terms with her first pregnancy, the MSC's co-ordinating body, Multimedia Development Corporation Sdn Bhd, is still awed by the tremendous responsibilities it faces.

Adding further pressures to the desire to have a perfect baby is that of well-meaning gamut of advice from parents, in-laws, relatives and friends - which inevitably tend to contradict each other.

Some of these well-meaning gestures may even go to ridiculous extents - like booking a place in the university for the baby or hiring a piano tutor.

Needless to say, this human simile can be played out further to reflect how various expectations have or have not been met as at the end of 1996 as we take stock of what actually has been achieved so far with the MSC project.

Perhaps, the most critical, yet subtle, achievement to be notched up so far is that the MSC project is no longer a vague notion unfamiliar to many.

Within the span of mere months, the futuristic idea of the MSC project has captured the imagination of many, including foreign investors. And the continued promotion efforts will attract more of the same.

While the basic infrastructure and design for the MSC project are still on the drawing board, efforts led by Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad have already successfully won the acceptance of some leading global visionaries to become godfathers to the MSC project. Among them are Microsoft Corporation's William Gates and Netscape Communications' Jim Clark, who will act as advisers for the MSC project.

Another successful achievement for the MSC project is that of many local and foreign entrepreneurs already coming up with technologies, services and products within the MSC area.

Some of them have already been featured in this column, including Sun Microsystems' Java technology, STI Entertainments' new projector and a comprehensive business database Asia Link by Ad'age Associate.

Others have been featured in other publications, and this includes several massive residential and commercial property developments.

What makes this set of achievements all the more important is that it reflects the ability of a select group of entrepreneurs who are able to share the vision of the MSC project in that it will have a vast commercial potential.

Even so, only a handful of such entrepreneurs have stepped forward, and most of the initiative still seems to come from the public sector - mainly that relating to distance learning and electronic government.

Perhaps, the major stumbling block has been that of cyberlaws governing copyright and electronic commerce issues - which had been delayed from being presented in Parliament from December to February this year.

With this delay, the Government may have lost some of the initiative that the bold vision of the MSC project had entailed, as a number of other

competing nations had already instituted their own cyberlaws.

In particular, Singapore has seized the initiative suggested in this column and set up a tribunal that conducts hearings for a trial via videoconferencing.

Soon, all court documents need only to be filed electronically.

The underlying factor behind this issue is that of security, as it is not possible to offer foolproof protection for data transmitted electronically. But, as with most other security measures - including those of cars and homes - the need for protection has to be balanced against practicality and cost.

Still, Bank Negara has conducted some studies on the matter with a view of allowing fully-electronic transactions.

And this is expected to be made available by early next year, to allow the purchase of tickets for events at the Commonwealth Games via the global computer network Internet, in the same way as Olympic tickets in Atlanta.

On another front, the issue of the high-speed telecommunications infrastructure is expected to become another stumbling block as most telecommunications firms (including those abroad) hesitate to provide the final kerb-to-house high-speed linkages.

About the only notable exception has been that of Binariang Sdn Bhd, which had conducted trials to install such links to homes within the Klang Valley last year, and plans to wire up at least 100,000 households this year.

The question now is whether other telecommunications companies will take a similar initiative to provide users with the option to upgrade to a faster telecommunications link or just wait.

However, it is unlikely that the situation will continue to be so from 1998 as all the telecommunications firms gear up for liberalisation in 1999 and start offering high-speed links simply to keep up with the competition.

Even while this metaphysical analysis is being conducted by various interested parties, the more important factor to note is that of introductory products and services that consumers have access to now - so as to be able to get more familiar with the MSC project and its potential. It is interesting to note that such steps have been taken, with a prepaid card system at the Sultan Abdul Aziz Shah International Airport in Subang where a traveller can send and receive electronic mail at computer terminals.

The smart card could also be introduced this year for limited usage for various services and as payments, and this could possibly be started with the integrated ticketing system for the Light Rail Transit systems and the Intrakota buses in Kuala Lumpur.

From the banking sector, the usage of automated teller machines could also be extended with the possibility of booking and paying for airline tickets and for the application of initial public offers of shares.

On the commercial front, the major new test bed will be that of the PenangNet project which is due to commence operations on Jan 29.

With it, both local and foreign users will finally get a feel of what the MSC project could be as PenangNet will be offering many of the services and products that will also be offered in the MSC project area.

However, the MSC project - which will be centred around the new Federal administrative centre Putrajaya - will offer a lot more as it will be the first electronic government in the world to be conducted at the national level.

And, unlike PenangNet, investors recognised as being part of the MSC project stand to get a substantial tax-holiday as the project area is also

a very specialised free trade zone operating as a self-sufficient cyber-township.

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