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## Mounting opposition to Sprint Expressway

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KUALA LUMPUR, Thurs. - Opposition to the proposed Sprint Expressway is mounting as those affected learn more about the details of the project.

Apart from concern over pollution and land acquisition, they are more incensed by the current lack of information on the project and silence on the part of the concessionaire.

"Whatever little we know we learnt from the Press. The highway company has not provided us with any information," said Datuk Noor Azam, chairman of the newly-formed Sungai Penchala Zone Residents Association.

Opposition to the proposed project has come from some of the most varied sectors of Kuala Lumpur's society.

The people of five kampungs in the Sg Penchala area have found themselves asking the same questions as the residents of affluent Bukit Bandaraya and Pantai Hill, and the academics, students and staff of Universiti Malaya.

They are now thinking of coming together to form a united force to appeal against the highway to all relevant bodies and even Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad.

The reasons for opposition are simple and straightforward.

"The project goes against the Government's pro-environmental stand as it will destroy hills, rivers and villages," said Noor, also chairman of Sistem Televisyen Malaysia Berhad, or TV3.

He claimed the highway which would be of no use to residents in the area will instead cause hardship during its construction and when completed.

What irks Sg Penchala residents most is the loss of land - more specifically, Malay reserve land.

"Already, there is very little Malay reserve land left and now they want to take 38 hectares away from us," Noor added.

The loss of something valuable is also the driving force behind the opposition from academicians, staff, students and management of UM. The proposed Kerinchi Link of the highway will run through the campus.

"Universiti Malaya is part of our country's heritage. How can one destroy such a historic establishment by constructing a six-lane highway through it?" asked Dr Azizah Abu Samah, acting secretary of the Universiti Malaya Academic Staff Association.

The association's chairman, Associate Prof Datuk Mahadzir Mohd Khir, said the highway would cause many problems to those on campus, adding that "the noise and dirt will turn the campus into a slum".

Although the concessionaire has generally maintained its silence over the project, it nevertheless issued a Press statement on March 13.

It said the company was committed to ensuring the environmental impact from construction and operation of the highway would be kept to a minimum, including the planting of trees and landscaping.

It also stated that construction work on the highway would only start towards the end of the year after the 16th Commonwealth Games.

Nevertheless, soil testing had already been carried out. In fact, it was this work carried out on private land in Sg Penchala and on UM land behind the houses in Bukit Pantai which aroused the suspicion of the residents of both areas.

"These people trespassed on private land to do soil testing. They didn't ask for permission to enter private land," said Noor.

Besides environmental and social considerations, arguments that the

highway would not solve Kuala Lumpur's traffic problems have also been put forward.

"It is a fact that bulding highways will not solve traffic problems," said UM's Azizan.

He said the approval of the highway project went against the Government's policy of encouraging urban public transport, a statement to which Sabariah Jemali, co-ordinator of Institut Teknologi Mara's Malaysian Centre of Transportation Studies, agrees.

"In order to promote public transport, you should be giving it the competitive edge and not build highways which will give it competition instead," she said.

Sabariah added that it was unfortunate that those affected had not been informed of the project, stating that such was the reality of privatisation.

"In more developed countries, people who are affected are the first to be informed of any pending acquisition or project," she said.

Traffic consultant Goh Bok Yen said companies submitting proposals for highways would normally keep the details secret until the concession agreement was signed.

He, however, said once a concession agreement was in place, either the concessionaire or the Government should explain to the public the details of the highway.

"If those who live near the proposed highway are objecting, the concessionaire should solve the problem immediately," he said.

Goh said the kind of public participation being demonstrated these days was good and the Government or concessionaire should set up mechanisms for proper public participation.

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