

18/02/1998

New industry takes shape at Proton City

Stephanie Rajendram

TANJUNG MALIM, Tues. - Proton City. The very name conjures up images of clinical factory units and hi-tech operations.

The vision will still be realised but at a slower pace as a result of the economic downturn. In the meantime, against the backdrop of earthworks and building superstructures, a new industry is taking shape - agriculture.

Responding to the call to produce more food and not to leave land unutilised, the developer of Proton City is converting part of the 1,600-hectare site into a commercial farm.

Hardly a month after bulldozers and tractors were put to work by one of the contractors chosen for the farming project, rows of polybags, nursery beds and chicken coops stand testimony to the happy balance that can be achieved between industry and agriculture if economic planners and entrepreneurs cared to think more holistically.

Heeding the call, Proton City Development Corporation Sdn Bhd has put in motion to convert, at least temporarily, a substantial portion of the land to short- and medium-term crop production.

Located 90km from Kuala Lumpur and 131km from Ipoh, Proton City is a strategic site for commercial production of vegetables, fruits, freshwater fish and poultry.

In fact, the project site in Ulu Behrang, three kilometres from Tanjung Malim, originally belonged to the Veterinary Department but was abandoned. It now forms part of Proton City.

In an interview with the New Straits Times at the project site, PCDC general manager Zahri Abdul Ghani said 520ha were being developed as a platform for the Proton plant, vendors zone and residential park.

"The remaining area will remain virtually untouched. In principle, we have agreed to turn about 280ha for agriculture.

"This is land suitable for crops as the topsoil has not been removed. Where the topsoil has been removed, we will plant creepers and trees to prevent soil erosion," he said.

In just two and a half weeks, about 24ha had been ploughed and some 5,000 banana saplings of the nangka, emas, rastali and several other varieties had been grown in polybags.

In addition 2,000 bamboo shoots, 400 pomelo and jackfruit saplings had also been grown.

"The target is to increase the number of banana plants to 20,000 and bamboo to 10,000," he added.

Zahri said a bamboo park was being created following a suggestion by the Prime Minister, Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad when he visited the area and found it covered with many types of bamboo.

"We had to source the various species including betung (*dendrocalamus asper*) and yellow bamboo (*bambusa vulgaris* var. *striata*) from the nearby jungle," he said.

Another feature of the farm will be a herbal garden planted with some 48 varieties of ulam (traditional vegetables served as salad).

Some 700 ayam kampung chicks are being bred at the poultry farm. In addition to chicken feed, they will be allowed to roam free and feed on natural vegetation.

"A visit here promises to be an educational experience. One can buy some ulam and chicken and learn about the different types of bamboo at the same

time," Zahri said.

About 12ha have been cleared and ploughed for the planting of vegetables such as baby kailan, spinach, long beans, cucumber, bitter gourd, ladies' fingers and others.

The papaya will be ready for harvesting in December while some of the vegetables will be ready for sale by May or June.

Aquaculture projects include the rearing of different types of catfish like the keli, and haruan, while the rearing of quail, duck, ostrich, cattle and goats is also in the pipeline.

Irrigation of the land is made possible by the three main streams that flow through the site, namely the Sungai Keroh, Sakiah and Bernam.

Besides the Agriculture Ministry, the PCDC will work with three consultants - Dr Ramli Md Nor of the Malaysian Agricultural Research and Development Institute, James Kingham of Nostalgia Impian Sdn Bhd and Dr Nordin Abdul Rahman of Universiti Putra Malaysia.

Four operators, headed by Nostalgia, are handling the cultivation of the crops. The other three are Pertubuhan Peladang Bidor, Bunga Mekar Sdn Bhd also of Bidor and Hikma Nature Sdn Bhd of Sarawak.

Asked what will happen once work on the Proton City project resumes, Zahri said the bamboos for instance, would be replanted around the automotive city as part of its beautification and landscaping efforts.

Nostalgia chairman Datuk Wan Adli Wan Ibrahim said the parcel of land being used for the crops was intended to be developed as the last phase in about eight years' time.

The scheduled completion date of Proton City was to have been 2010 but last month, it was announced that the entire project had to be deferred for at least three years.

Proton City will be the site of the second manufacturing plant for Perusahaan Otomobil Nasional Bhd, the national car manufacturer.

(END)