

16/02/1998

Thumbs-up from advisers as MSC takes shape

Wendy Lim

THE Multimedia Super Corridor's International Advisory Panel (IAP) ended its meeting on Friday on a note of renewed confidence and commitment, not just in Malaysia, but also the region.

The two-day meeting, which was attended by 13 of the panel's 44 members, was a follow-up to the inaugural meeting held at Stanford University, California, on January 16 1997.

At that time, when Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad sold his vision of the MSC, many were not able to grasp the concept fully.

A year later, Malaysia surprised many with concrete MSC infrastructure in Cyberjaya, a previously unknown 750 sq km area surrounded by oil palms 40km south of Kuala Lumpur. Despite the economic problems in the region, the MSC has progressed as planned. In fact, it is ahead of schedule.

The IAP members gave a ringing endorsement of the MSC and the Malaysian economy, saying they are very impressed with the facilities, local capabilities and the Government's passion and flexibility.

As Motorola chairman Gary Tooker put it: "It is one thing for a visionary discussion in Stanford ... but in a short period, the vision has taken shape. In spite of some temporary setbacks, there is a clear intention to move forward."

Speaking individually at a joint press conference with Dr Mahathir after the meeting, members said the level of attendance despite the currency situation showed their confidence in the Malaysian economy.

Their enthusiasm was summed up by Mr Bob Bishop of Silicon Graphics World Trade Corp, who said: "The MSC can be the catalyst to pull Malaysia, and possibly the region, out of the economic downturn by capitalising on the technology of the future."

Mr Jim Manzi, a private technology investor, referring to the economic problems affecting the region, said: "Malaysia is a very different story."

The panellists also said they perceived a deepening of the entrepreneurship culture in the country and a well-planned and flexible programme for the MSC, among other things. All of them expressed their admiration for the leadership's commitment to information technology (IT).

Alcatel Alsthom chairman and CEO Serge Tchuruk said: "We saw projects and business plans. I do not know a country anywhere in the world where the government has such a deep knowledge of IT ... this includes the Prime Minister. I have a remarkable faith in the future of this country in high technology."

Mr Alex Sozonoff, vice-president and general manager marketing and operations group of Hewlett-Company said: "I too have real admiration for what is going on and I cannot think of any place in the world which has such passion and energy for what is happening."

Siemens AG vice-president Axel Hass is optimistic that the German conglomerate is "investing in the right place".

Led by Dr Mahathir, the panellists, some from rival companies, sitting side by side, started their day at 9am and worked right through.

A few of the panellists detailed their investments in the MSC, like Lucent Technologies Inc's Ben J.M. Verwaayen, who said the company's commitments to the MSC were are "far more than US\$100 million".

Motorola announced investments of US\$11 million over the next two years in the MSC while Japan's NTT detailed its US\$10 million plans. Siemens agreed to an extra US\$1 billion over three years in addition to its US\$2.5

billion investments in Malaysia.

Investments by the 180 companies which have applied for MSC status are expected to reach RM4.3 billion over a five-year period.

Praises aside, several members raised a few concerns. Among them is the "willingness to fail" which Ambassador Diana Lady Dougan of the Washington-based Centre for Strategic & International Studies explained is a key factor in the success of the Silicon Valley. Creativity alone is not enough. MSC status companies will need to inculcate a "dare to fail" attitude to improve on their innovations.

Members also questioned the level of "protection" to nurture the development of these companies in cultivating the spirit of entrepreneurship.

Panellists also raised concerns over restrictions and were initially doubtful about the "one country, two systems" adopted in the MSC. But the Government has promised restrictions will not apply to the MSC and there will be lots of flexibility.

The issue of knowledge workers was also brought up and most companies expressed their willingness to base their best experts here and offered to train locals.

In this respect, several panellists said they are impressed with local capabilities.

Acer chairman Dr Stan Shih outlined his intentions for joint ventures with local companies, saying "perhaps 10 years down the road, Malaysia will be able to export as much software as hardware".

The MSC is about software and content development. There is no doubt Malaysians have the creativity and ability to develop world-class software for the global market. But one important missing link is the marketing platform.

The Ministry of International Trade and Industry, which was previously not directly involved in the marketing of the MSC, is now promising its help by including the MSC in all its programmes.

The MSC is one way to get Malaysia to the cutting edge of technology but the real test lies in the ability to bring IT to Malaysians wherever they are.

In this area, the noble gesture by Sun Microsystems chief scientist Dr John Gage in offering foreign companies to help connect schools to the Internet is much welcomed.

The programme, Gage said, can be implemented in Malaysia on a volunteer basis whereby local engineers and wiremen spare a day to wire up a school.

The "wiring up of schools" programme is similar to the NetDay programme implemented by Sun Microsystems in the US whereby 100,000 people wired up 4,000 schools.

"The foreign companies are prepared to help but it is up to engineers and wiremen to pick a day and put up all the necessary wires in the school," Gage said.

Siemens vice-president Hass, who travelled to Malaysia by train from Bangkok, was convinced that the MSC can even be integrated into all regions of the country.

"The MSC may be a test-bed but the real world is outside," he said.

Indeed, Hass is not wrong and if the latest technology can be brought to Malaysians, even in the most remote parts of the country, then the MSC will truly be a success.

Malaysia will indeed reap the benefits. After all, IT is poised to be the biggest industry of the future.

(END)