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City's rich heritage may be preserved if project takes off

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PENANG, Fri. - Georgetown's heritage-rich inner city may be preserved if a proposed social housing programme by the State Government takes off.

Counting on approval by the Federal Government for a three-year extension to the Rent Control (Repeal) Act 1997, the State is looking at refurbishing existing rent-controlled shophouses, godowns and dilapidated houses so that the inner city will not be bereft of economic and social activities once the repeal takes effect.

The viability of this plan is being determined by the Penang Heritage Trust by studying the pattern of use of these buildings located in "multi-ethnic" areas.

They include Little India, Lebu Armenian, Lebu Muntri and Lorong Stewart.

A social housing concept will be developed in two months and presented to the Chief Minister for submission to the Federal Government.

"Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad is sympathetic to the cause of social housing in Penang and has shown an openness to suggestions on how alternative housing can be provided to the poor in the inner city," State Economic Planning Committee chairman Datuk Dr Toh Kin Woon told the New Straits Times.

Penang is hoping to obtain a loan from the Federal authorities for the refurbishment of the pre-war buildings, he added.

The inner city is the hub of the State's commercial, administrative, legal and artistic activities and 8,259 of Penang's 12,672 rent-controlled premises are located in Georgetown.

Toh, who chairs a sub-committee on the implications of the repeal of the Act, said while the State was hopeful its request to the Prime Minister for an extension to the repeal of the Act would be granted, an alternative plan of action in housing affected residents was already in place, just in case.

"Nearly 1,000 low-cost flats at Rifle Range and Jalan Sungai would be allocated at very minimal rental to elderly, disabled and single tenants who may find themselves in a lurch by Dec 31, 1999."

To help those affected by the repeal of the Act which came into effect in September 1997, the Government had granted a grace period until Dec 31, 1999, during which time owners can only charge a graded rental below market rates.

The full effect of the repeal would only be felt on Jan 1, 2000 when market forces decide the rental rates.

Toh said the original figure from a Universiti Sains Malaysia census in 1994 that 16,000 people in 12,672 rent-controlled buildings in Penang would be affected by the repeal of the Act would need to be revised.

A registration exercise his committee conducted in 1997 to determine the exact number of affected people needing alternative housing only recorded 4,000 households.

Furthermore, from the 1,100 offers made by the State Housing Division to affected tenants for low-cost housing units in Green Lane and Paya Terubong, only 200 had accepted.

"We are therefore assuming the other tenants do not need alternative housing."

However, the State Assemblymen from Kampung Kolam, Pengkalan Kota and Padang Kota, Lim Gin Soon, Lee Hack Teik and Teng Chang Yeow respectively

- home to most of Georgetown's residents affected by the repeal of the Act  
- have been making door-to-door enquiries from their constituents on why they refused State offers of low-cost housing units.

"We should have a better picture of this soon."

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