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Plenty needs to be done for Penang to regain lost shine

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THE epithets of late have not been very flattering - "Pearl losing its lustre" or "Penang going to the dogs" - and the brickbats come thick and fast not only from tourists but from local residents as well.

A few years ago, the State authorities put up billboards exhorting the public to "Bring Back the Shine". Judging from present conditions and the negative feedback, it has remained a mere slogan.

Many local residents agree that there has not been substantial improvement since the time Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad described Penang as "the garbage dump of the Orient".

There was a flurry of activities in the wake of the criticism but things died down soon after and everybody went back to their bad, old habits.

Many such problems still exist as we prepare to enter the next millennium. To many, there is still a lot to do to make Penang more 'people-friendly'.

The Consumer Association of Penang received numerous complaints regarding roads and other thoroughfares being choked by motor vehicles.

"Despite a lot of talk from the authorities, little has been done to reduce the number of private cars on our streets. Pedestrians are facing a harrowing time from motor vehicles," said CAP spokesperson Meenakshi Raman.

Pedestrians today, she said, cannot even use sidewalks and five-footways which are meant for them. Motorcyclists would roar down sidewalks and pavements to beat the one-way traffic system.

"As for five-foot ways, many shops and stores are blocking them by bringing out their wares and merchandise. We wonder why the Municipal Council is allowing such practices to go unchecked?" she said.

Meenakshi also called on the authorities to address the problem of vagrants, beggars and drug addicts as part of a 'larger social vision'. She said there must be a more humane way of solving the problem.

The Welfare Department would round up beggars and vagrants "once in a while" to clear the streets and shopping centres. After that the beggars and vagrants would be back. This has been the situation all the while.

Foreign tourists have also expressed disgust at the number of buses, lorries, vans and other vehicles spewing black fumes with impunity.

Danish traveller Patricia Sarvig who visits Penang regularly said the Komtar area should be more people-friendly especially to senior citizens and the handicapped.

"Older people like me depend on trishaws to get about but trishaws are reluctant to take you to Komtar as they are often squeezed out by motor vehicles," she said.

She was also horrified to see rats not only at eating stalls but also at some budget hotels in Lebuh Chulia.

Factory manager Chang Chuen Bin said the authorities should also be more tourist-friendly for ease of travel.

"For instance, our bus stops do not even provide information regarding bus numbers and their routes. Not all tourists can afford to take taxis," he said.

Teacher Oon Kim Booy expressed her exasperation with road works which take a long time to complete and cause unnecessary traffic bottlenecks.

Many of these roads are also badly patched up after being dug up. One example is Jalan Sultan Ahmad Shah and Jalan Argyll which now guarantee

motorists and motorcyclists a bumpy ride.

Writer Abdul Rahim Karim said the Municipal Council and other authorities should encourage building owners to repair and repaint decrepit buildings and shophouses which have become an eyesore.

"The council should also be more pro-active in beautifying Penang, for example through landscaping," he said.

He said people living in the core areas of the city should also be discouraged from keeping dogs.

"In Lebuah Campbell, many shops have to clear dog excreta from their five-footways every morning. Shoppers and passers-by also step on such excrement along Penang Road. When this happens, we cannot expect them to have a good impression of Penang," he said.

He called on the council not to compromise with those who discharge oil, grease and other harmful effluents into drains, canals and rivers. The culprits, he said, were usually motor workshops, restaurants and backyard industries.

He said there were still many inconsiderate people who were disposing of their rubbish in drains and canals, thereby clogging them.

"This is why flash floods are so common in Georgetown today. The council must do more to deter such irresponsible acts," he said.

Penang Heritage Trust secretary Khoo Salma Nasution said the Municipal Council should allow the public to make more use of the Town Hall.

"Wedding receptions and kenduris, for example, could be held here for a moderate fee. Exhibitions, talks and seminars pertaining to Penang could also be held here."

Salma said Penang should provide more public parks adding that there was not a single park at Bayan Baru which is the State's second largest township.

There is really a lot more to be done before the 'shine' comes back to Penang, the tarnished pearl.

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