

25/01/1999

Proposed futuristic gateway a cause for genuine celebration

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THERE is a great deal of euphoria in Johor about the proposed bridge or Southern International Gateway to replace the Causeway despite conflicting reports on when work on the project will start.

While Works Minister Datuk Seri S. Samy Vellu and his Singapore counterpart Lim Hng Kiang have maintained that nothing has been finalised, the developers - Gerbang Perdana Sdn Bhd - are on record as saying that construction would begin by January next year.

This was confirmed by Johor Menteri Besar Datuk Abdul Ghani Othman, who was quoted last week as saying that the project would become a reality by 2003.

People in Johor are genuinely upbeat about this prospect, especially those who see it as a fitting tribute to Malaysia's leap into the new millennium.

The design of the elevated futuristic bridge and the high-tech new customs, immigration and quarantine (CIQ) complex were unveiled at a briefing for top Johor officials in Johor Baru last week.

Ghani was clearly delighted with what he saw, describing the development as something "all Malaysians can be proud of".

Others have described it as spectacular and awe-inspiring, saying the grand design and scope of the project was appropriate because Johor, after all, is the "Southern Gateway" to Malaysia.

With more than 70 per cent of all tourists to Malaysia entering the country via Johor, a signature bridge and landmark CIQ complex ought to serve as a welcoming and "eye-catching" gateway into Malaysia, reflecting the nation's shift to high technology and super structures.

This, indeed, was the underlying objective of Gerbang Perdana - the consortium set up to spearhead the RM1.5 billion project over the next three years.

Besides building a bridge of international status, more importantly, it wants the development to transcend mere functional and engineering requirements, to establish its own image and identity.

The goal, ultimately, is to bring Johor Baru into the same league with other international waterfront cities such as Sydney, San Francisco and London.

The Gerbang Perdana consortium involves three parties - Ibex Corp Amalgamated through its wholly-owned subsidiary Merong Mahawangsa Sdn Bhd (60 per cent equity), Diversified Resources Bhd (20 per cent) and Transwater Corp Bhd's Detik Nagasari Sdn Bhd (20 per cent).

The consortium has secured a 33-year concession from the Federal Government to design, finance, build, operate and transfer the entire project.

The Southern International Gateway boasts four key components - an elevated bridge, a high-tech CIQ complex, new interchanges and road upgrading and a new rail link.

The development of the railway line will be interesting to observe because the present track which runs parallel to the Causeway may be realigned with an elevated structure or built under the sea using a tunnel system.

The bridge itself, stretching a kilometre across the Tebrau Straits with three-quarters of it located in Malaysia, will have a navigational clearance of between nine and 25 metres.

Shaped like a bird's wing, with twin cable-suspended arch superstructures, it will be large enough to support dual three-lane vehicular traffic, a motorcycle lane and pedestrian walkway.

The CIQ complex, on the other hand, will be an enormous integrated structure spread over 29.5ha of reclaimed land extending some 300m from the shoreline.

The sinuous bridge would be joined to this two-storey building located at the site of the present Tanjung Puteri Customs Complex for lorries, on the eastern side of the present Causeway.

Shaped like a gambir leaf, the futuristic and high-tech CIQ complex would cater to lorries on the ground floor, with light vehicles using the upper deck.

When completed, the project would divert all in-coming traffic from Singapore away from the Johor Baru city centre to the Inner Ring Road, thus easing the State capital of traffic congestion.

There would be extensive landscaping and road upgrading around Jalan Bukit Meldrum, Jalan Selat Tebrau and all other connecting roads, with new traffic interchanges at Jalan Ibrahim Sultan and a proposed new coastal highway.

The benefits of the proposed Southern International Gateway are numerous. Apart from easing traffic congestion and improving traffic dispersal and circulation in Johor Baru, it is also designed to mitigate and control pollution in the Tebrau Straits and reopen the waterway for recreational and leisure activities.

More importantly, it would also improve security surveillance of the Straits, boost tourism, accelerate economic growth, spur development of the surrounding areas, create opportunities for urban renewal and enhance Johor Baru's position as the southern growth corridor.

The project would also be a boon for Malaysia-Singapore bilateral relations.

The proposal to replace the Causeway with a bridge was first announced by Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad in Johor Baru on July 5, 1996. Gerbang Perdana went to work on the project almost immediately,

It secured the letter of award for the development from the Economic Planning Unit on June 25 last year. Its team of consultants was subsequently assembled, with the concept design completed last October.

Dr Mahathir was officially briefed on the Southern International Gateway by the developers last Nov 5 followed by another presentation to the EPU on Dec 17.

The design and scope of the project was unveiled to Johor authorities on Jan 14, with Ghani giving the "thumbs-up" for the commencement of works.

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