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Set up a housing watchdog

TO THE unscrupulous, it must be very inconvenient to have an ex-developer like Tun Daim Zainuddin taking such a keen interest in their affairs. In his latest reminder to the industry, the First Finance Minister warned any developer against any attempt to compromise the specifications for low-cost houses set by the Government. Since June, when the Government agreed to a three-tiered price structure for low-cost houses - RM25,000, RM35,000 and RM42,000 - from a flat rate of RM25,000, developers are required to ensure they build low-cost houses with a minimum built-up area of 600 sq ft, three bedrooms and two bathrooms each.

Daim's warning should also be seen by the relevant authorities as a reminder for them to be vigilant in ensuring that the specifications are adhered to. Often rules are broken or compromised not only because of the lack of scruples but also because of poor enforcement. In fact, some believe that it is the failure of the authorities to monitor the housing developers' activities that encourages some of them to try and cut corners. The rampant hill-cutting activities by developers is a clear case in hand. Even Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad has complained about how the decision made by the Cabinet to ban the cutting of hills during housing development went unnoticed. Despite protests, hills continued to be cut and flattened to make way for houses. There have been cases where green lung areas in the city or land meant for public parks or recreation were used for purposes meant for the elite few. Not too long ago, Daim openly criticised such abuses by developers and the failure of the relevant authorities to prevent them.

The only way to convey the message to the unscrupulous is to deal with them severely. There are many good and conscientious developers who are anxious to see that the unscrupulous ones are dealt with for the sake of the industry's image. Not all developers are so greedy as to convert a lone football field among a jungle of concrete into yet another commercial project. But for certain, there have been several such cases. Such attempts were thwarted only when residents took up the issues with the media. In turn, the media, staged campaigns against the errant developers. Why and how some of these cases even got past the relevant authorities have raised some pertinent questions. The answers and explanations thus far have been less than satisfactory.

If it is shortage of enforcement officers to check on errant developers, perhaps the industry ought to give a helping hand. Just over a month ago, in its budget memorandum to the Finance Minister, the Housing Developers Association proposed self-regulation for the industry as a means to reduce costs through speedier delivery and less bureaucracy. Perhaps this self-regulation idea can be extended to encourage the industry to become its own watchdog. This watchdog, which can come under the HDA, will complement the efforts of the relevant authorities to ensure that developers abide by all rules and regulations. The industry watchdog can appoint representatives or set up task forces in housing estates or towns, and these can consist of a cross-section of individuals from outside the industry, including representatives from residential committees.

The idea is to ensure that the housing industry and the image of developers are not tainted because of greed and the uncaring attitude of a few. By having its own watchdog, the housing industry will not be accused of failing to help discipline its own players. The relevant authorities,

however, will still need to enhance its own enforcement teams. Together, the industry's watchdog and the relevant authorities can form a formidable force to tidy up the industry and promote greater professionalism.

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