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New life for Proton City

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THE Proton City project may have been put on the shelf during the economic crisis, but work did not come to a halt.

A visit by the New Sunday Times to the development site, now revived, showed substantial progress in the infrastructure development.

Work on the automotive plant on a 1,600ha site is at a standstill after initial foundation and piling works, but work on other infrastructure is completed or nearing completion.

This includes the Tanjung Malim-Proton City-Northsouth Expressway dual-carriageway, highvoltage electric substations and bridges.

There is also a partly completed students' hostel complex of Universiti Pendidikan Sultan Idris (UPSI) where currently more than 1,300 students are residing.

A scheduled bus service from Tanjung Malim is also serving the transportation requirements of the hostel residents.

In January 1998, the Malaysian automotive industry took a step back when Proton announced the deferment of its multi-billion ringgit Proton City project in Ulu Behrang.

Taking the cue from earlier comments, in December 1997, by the then Finance Minister, Proton chairman Datuk Wira Mohd Salleh Sulong reluctantly announced that the entire Proton City project, including the national car manufacturer's second major plant, would be deferred for at least three years.

The reason, as explained by Salleh then; "Proton City is viewed as one of the mega-projects, so in line with the fact that we need to conserve funds, we have decided, in as much as we have been advised by the Government, to delay this project until such time when the economic situation improves".

From then on the future of the ambitious automotive-city project was very bleak, especially after the regional economic crisis where most large corporations stalled almost every "mega" leap.

However on Tuesday, after earlier hints by Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad that the landmark Proton City project might be revived, Proton chief executive officer Tengku Tan Sri Mahaleel Tengku Ariff announced that the project will kick-off, sooner than later.

As not to derail Proton's longterm plans to achieve economies of scale and increased exports, Tengku Mahaleel announced on Tuesday that Proton was in the process of appointing a management team to oversee the revival of the project.

According to a project site-supervisor met at one of the construction areas, the only active operation in the area now was the construction work to complete the second phase of the students' hostel.

"There were many visitors in the last few weeks and some of them were Japanese nationals who hold some form of interest here, ... maybe its a prelude to the revival of this project," he said, pointing to the Proton plant site.

Meanwhile the entrance to the Proton City automotive plant is totally sealed.

Three security guards were the only souls there, guarding two deserted office complexes and building materials.

Denying entry to the site, one of them said: "Even if you go in, there is nothing much in there, only steel and concrete beams lying idle, and

empty offices".

The automotive plant, according to its initial scale, was to be the largest automotive factory in the region equipped with the latest technology in the industry.

Apart from a huge area for the production of Proton cars, a 204ha site was to be occupied by Proton vendors.

The rest would comprise the construction of a test-drive circuit, an automotive technology centre and a housing estate.

The city has 238.8ha allocated for roads and buffers, 156ha for parks and lakes including a man-made lake, 91ha for town centres and 78.8ha for other facilities like a convention centre and a hotel.

The first phase of the project comprises the plant, vendors' factories and 2,000 condominium units.

Phase two, covering 393ha (about 25 per cent) was originally scheduled to be built between 2001 and 2003, while phases three and four were to take up the remaining 20 per cent of space and developed from 2004 to 2006 and from 2007 to 2010 respectively.

The entire development would create 250,000 jobs with 60,000 workers living within its border and the rest outside of it.

The much awaited Proton City project would certainly be delayed from the initial scheduled completion, but many, including local residents of Tanjung Malim and Behrang are eager that the catalyst for growth in their area will finally start moving, ... after three long years.