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Baleh-IDP

INTEGRATED PARK TO "TAME" SARAWAK'S HORSE MOUNTAIN COUNTRY

A Special Report by Frankie L. Labang

KUCHING: The Sarawak government will turn 12,000 hectares of land into an Integrated Development Park (IDP) at the foothills of the fabled Horse Mountain in Baleh, Kapit division, under the current 8th Malaysia Plan.

Sarawak's Social Development and Urbanisation Minister Datuk Seri Dr James Jemut Masing, who is assemblyman for Baleh, said the blue-print for the park in central Sarawak will among others ensure that development projects in the IDP would not have negative effects on the existing biodiversity and pristine environment.

The government wants to continue to preserve the existing wildlife and flora, water catchment areas as well as the Sungai Tunoh river tributaries which supply water to longhouses in Baleh constituency.

"The state government welcomes private sector involvement to push development to the foothills and they can rest assured that they have strong government backing," he told Bernama.

The area to be developed has available water supply because the source comes from Sungai Tunoh, which is also a tributary of Sungai Melinau.

PRIVATE SECTOR-DRIVEN

He said the government would provide the necessary allocation for the IDP but the start-up capital to put basic infrastructure facilities in place has to come from the private sector.

Dr Masing said these infrastructures are electricity, potable water, proper and attractive low- to medium-cost houses for people to buy at affordable prices, a school for primary and secondary students, a clinic for the the people and shophouses.

"Baleh in central region of Sarawak has been designated as an ecotourism destination by the federal government since it has plenty of potential to be developed over time," he said.

The State Planning Unit (SPU) has carried out research on the proposed IDP at the foothills with the objective to ensure investors reap healthy returns in the long run, he said.

Dr Masing is confident that although about RM3 billion are needed to develop the IDP in phases within the next 15 years for the plan to work, the ambitious project can materialize.

FERTILE LAND

"Factors like soil fertility and suitability coupled with low temperature below Horse Mountain all year round are just right to support the healthy growing of cash crops," he said.

He said as a start, several types of cash crops like broccoli and cauliflower had been grown on an experimental basis and so far, the results looked good. While technology can speed up development at the foothills, its long-term survival would depend on knowledge workers having suitable skills and experience.

"Quality packaging of the fresh crops can have access to the nearest markets in Kapit, Sibul, Bintulu, Miri, and even neighbouring rich-oil Brunei, Kuching and for the export markets," he said.

"We want hardworking, multi-skills Ibans from within Baleh to migrate with their families to work the IDP. I believe the Ibans who have worked in timber camps who rose from the ranks-and-file to supervisory level have what it takes to make this proposed project successful," he said.

Dr Masing said Ibans who migrated to big towns and the city have acquired entrepreneurial skills and they can also focus on investment opportunities.

JOBS FOR YOUNG MEN AND WOMEN

He urged young men and women from the Iban community in Baleh to not only work on the cash crop farms but also manage its daily operations, thus playing an active role in raising their own living standards.

On history of Baleh, he said some 40,000 Ibans settlers who had migrated from other parts of the state had started farming, while others worked in timber camps about 80 years ago.

"In my humble opinion, the idea for the project which came about 20 years ago has all the political push to make it happen with strong participation and investment from the private sector," he said, adding that a strong Barisan Nasional (BN) government would spur investors' confidence to invest in the country.

Dr Masing said Prime Minister Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi who took over the federal leadership from Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad will promote the prevailing peace and harmony.

"With strong fundamentals, the country's economy will continue to prosper under Pak Lak, and the people in Baleh want development by the ruling BN government," he added. -- Bernama

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