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Bridge project will help curb pollution

Koh Lay Chin

KUALA LUMPUR, Sat. - The unique road and railway bridge that will replace half of the Johor Causeway will allow for the flow of water currents in the Straits of Johor, "flushing" out years of built-up toxins and stagnation that have mutated marine life.

Gerbang Perdana Sdn Bhd executive vice-chairman and managing director Datuk Yahya A. Jalil said the 1.45-km elevated bridge and railway swing bridge would reintroduce natural tide and sea currents, thereby alleviating the appalling pollution around the Causeway.

"At the time it was built in the 1920s, there were two tiny culverts to let water move from either side. Over the years, the culverts have been clogged and buried by sediments, making both sides stagnant and devoid of natural water flow," he said.

He said a detailed Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) study had been carried out and consultants engaged to determine the condition of the "grey and black" water, with the results anything but encouraging.

"The water is very toxic and the marine species there are mutants or have disappeared from the area. We cannot dredge or clean (the water) because over the years it would return to this condition.

"That is why we want this bridge elevated, to allow the environment to improve and for the marine life to flourish.

He said the Department of Environment was pleased with the project as it would allow the marine life and the mangrove-depleted embankments to recover.

The environmental benefits were just a fraction of the overall advantages of an elevated bridge, with positive effects also expected in tourism, traffic dispersal, economy, public relations and security, he added.

The new bridge would be built only on the Malaysian side or half of the Causeway, and would look like a harp-shaped structure that he said would be one-of-a-kind, attractive and functional.

The aesthetically unique and "harp" shape is due to the separation of the road bridge from the railway, which would have been constructed alongside the road bridge in the original proposal that was rejected by Singapore.

He said the elevated road bridge was curved as the 25-metre air draft elevation to allow watercraft to pass underneath had to be gradual, so that heavy vehicles such as lorries could cope with the incline.

"It is a hybrid between a road bridge and a causeway, which is unique in the world. It will be a stylish landmark and tourist attraction, in addition to being very unique in the world of architecture and bridge design," he said.

Maritime activities made possible with the elevated bridge such as pleasure boating in the Straits of Johor would further promote tourism and result in the development of new water-based tourism products, he said.

Tourism will also be enhanced by the improved traffic flow with the bridge, which would be wider by 10 metres (from the current Causeway's 24 metres), with dual four-lane carriageways and other project structures.

The Gerbang Selatan Bersepadu (GSB) project comprises a new Customs, Immigration and Quarantine (CIQ) complex, a Johor Baru Sentral Terminal, the road bridge, the rail bridge, the Interchange No. 1 (a three-tier interchange) and internal roads.

Yahya said construction began nine months ago simultaneously on the CIQ complex and the road bridge. He was confident the total project would be completed by Dec 31, 2005.

The project, he said, would reduce chronic traffic congestion in the Johor Baru central business district by diverting international traffic to the Johor Baru Inner Ring Road and improve the regional road network with better linkages.

He also said the project's economic benefits would be huge, with increased tourist arrivals resulting in more foreign exchange earnings and the new business opportunities created in the form of commercial, leisure and maritime activities along the shoreline.

Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad had said yesterday that Singapore would not be involved in the construction of the RM1 billion bridge as its initial proposal for a full road bridge "had failed to receive favourable response" from the republic.