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Environmental-friendly housing slow to catch on

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TWO proposals made by Government leaders recently may well infuse our way of living in housing estates with environmentally positive and sound common-sense practices, in coming years. But that's only on condition three "ifs" can be fulfilled - if we the citizens aren't indifferent; if developers and contractors can provide greater comfort and conveniences, and if everyone can work together to live in harmony with nature.

One proposal, in recent times that is, involves tackling the massive amount of garbage people churn out. As a solution, Penang Chief Minister Tan Sri Dr Koh Tsu Koon said it should be compulsory for every household to have garbage disposal grinders (GDGs) to handle their organic wastes.

Koh said Penang was studying the cost, mode of implementation and legal backing necessary to make GDG installation a requirement, and would refer to the Federal Government for input. He said he hopes it would be made a national policy, as it would reinforce the 3Rs - reuse, reduce, recycle - for non-organic wastes.

The proposal calls for every upper-income household to be equipped with a GDG while low- and low-medium-cost housing could have communal grinders.

The first step for all residents, Koh said, would be to separate organic wastes from the non-organic.

Another environmental-focused initiative was made by Housing and Local Government Minister Datuk Seri Ong Ka Ting, who said it will become mandatory for all households to harvest rainwater for washing their homes, cars and for watering plants, as requested by the National Water Council.

He said the council, chaired by Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad, recently made the decision that from now on, all new buildings will have to be installed with methods of catching rainwater for re-use in non-drinking needs.

For owners of existing buildings, Ong said the Government would consider making it compulsory for them to install rain harvest systems where possible. The buildings include flats, factories, markets, hotels, public halls, stadiums and Government buildings.

"According to architects, a system consisting of a 120-gallon tank in the ceiling, a 150-gallon tank on the ground, a pump, a control sensor and pipe installation would cost about RM4,000," Ong said, adding that the move to use rainwater "is not new, as the ministry had issued guidelines on it since 1999".

However, he said so far, only three local authorities - in Kuantan, Langkawi and Ampang Jaya - had encouraged developers to install the system.

It was also installed in certain residential phases built by the Selangor State Development Corporation (PKNS) in Kota Damansara. However, it has been rendered ineffective, because many of the house owners dismantled it when renovating their units.

"To most Malaysians, water is very cheap so there is no need to use rainwater," Ong remarked acerbically.

On the reason for the attitude, PKNS public relations manager Mohd Salim Yusoff said owners had complained that the pumps and tanks "raised their electricity bills and took up space", despite the agency explaining the merits of the system.

"We illustrated how it works ... but I think Malaysians have been enjoying the good life for so long, they have forgotten the hardships of

the past," Salim said.

Opinions obtained from prospective house buyers, however, show a changing mindset. Businessman S. Kumar, who is looking for a property in Subang Jaya, said he would do his bit for the environment and use the rainwater system if it is installed. But "RM4,000 is a lot to pay," he said.

Busy executive Marianne Lee, who is just about to move into her new apartment, welcomes the garbage grinder idea, but said she would not spend RM1,000 to RM2,000 on the grinder, nor would she sort out her trash.

Graphic designer Daniel Hong, who is scouting around for a suitable apartment for his family, welcomes having a GDG as part of a developer's incentive package. "It makes me feel good to do my bit for the environment," he said.