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Lumba Kuda flat dwellers look forward to JB's latest project

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WHEN the Johor Government officially announced two years ago that the Lumba Kuda and Bukit Cagar flats would be demolished, there was no dissenting voice and no one bothered to ask why.

The dwellers themselves understood that the blocks were decrepit and out of step with the times. Lumba Kuda and Bukit Cagar had outlived their usefulness and had turned into Johor Baru city centre's shabbiest landmarks.

The only concern raised was the welfare of the 2,600 families occupying the cramped, one- and two-bedroom units.

But by today, as information on the relocation programme for the residents has been made available, they can count themselves a fortunate lot who are about to receive more than they had bargained for.

Land is scarce in the city, yet the State Government has come up with a plan to relocate them in areas that are barely 5km away and within the city, including a parcel of land awarded by the Johor royal household.

The 2,500 new units, to be ready in about two years, will be for rent and sale. These will be three-bedroom units in low-rise (five-storey) blocks, with schools in the vicinity and public amenities thrown in.

As Menteri Besar Datuk Abdul Ghani Othman has put it, the State Government's alternative public housing for the residents "is part of our holistic development approach".

This holistic approach, emphasising a balance between physical development and the social needs of the people, has been actively advocated and pursued by Ghani since he took over the Johor Government's leadership in 1995.

The Lumba Kuda flats, built nearly four decades ago, and the nearby Bukit Cagar units constructed in the early 1980s, are to be demolished to make way for the Gerbang Selatan Bersepadu project that will cost between RM1.5 billion and RM2 billion.

Ground-breaking for the new project, which will involve the construction of a new Customs, Immigration and Quarantine (CIQ) complex and an elevated bridge to replace the Malaysian side of the Causeway, among others, was officiated by Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad on Friday.

It was learned that the planners had decided to locate the new CIQ complex on the existing Lumba Kuda and Bukit Cagar sites for a purpose. The CIQ was not initially planned for that area.

Presumably, this was intended to kill two birds with one stone: have a new entry point to benefit Johor Baru's status as the country's southern gateway and be in tandem with the central business district redevelopment blueprint on one side, and rid the city of the dilapidated flats and provide the dwellers with more comfortable homes on the other.

Of the two, the older Lumba Kuda flats will be pulled down first, some time after the residents have shifted to temporary accommodation on their own or with the help of the State Government.

According to a state official familiar with the issue, the plan is to demolish the Lumba Kuda flats after April, with demolition of Bukit Cagar to be done at a later date.

Those who opt to find temporary shelters on their own, he said, would be given RM400 a month for the next two years and RM1,000 as shifting allowance per family. The State Government will also help those keen on buying low-cost houses under the State's rumah rakyat programme.

Johor Baru Umno division chief and Barisan Nasional chairman Datuk Shahrir Abdul Samad, who has spoken on behalf of the flat dwellers at functions held in the city, was a jovial man when asked recently about the status of Lumba Kuda and Bukit Cagar.

To the former minister who talked about pursuing his role as a "postman" for the rakyat after winning a seat in the Umno supreme council in 2000, it was another battle won for the cause of the low-income group.

He believed that his proposal for the betterment of the flat residents sent to the Prime Minister sometime ago had at least been considered by the leadership.

"The idea to evacuate the flat residents had been mooted since the mid-1990s.

"And it has all along been my contention that the people must be taken care of, that the flat dwellers be relocated to areas within the Johor Baru parliamentary constituency, and in low-rise and more comfortable, three-room units.

"High-rise public housing comes with various problems - high maintenance cost and lifts that are frequently out of order, for example."

Interestingly, the affected residents, those in Lumba Kuda flats in particular, are by and large themselves looking forward to moving out, once there is alternative housing available. Stories have it that many dare not take the staircase or walk along the dark corridors (replacement light bulbs are normally found broken the day after their installation) at night, at least not alone, for fear of getting abused or becoming the victims of drug addicts and snatch thieves.

A resident, Lee Ni Ng, said all he asked for was an affordable house to buy or rent in a suitable location within the city area.

Harun Jais, who has occupied a flat in Bukit Cagar for nearly 20 years, said:

"We are used to living here in the city. If we are relocated to some remote place, it will be tough for us to adapt to the new environment."

Thanks to the Gerbang Selatan Bersepadu project, Johor's holistic development approach and all, the residents' hopes are not about to be dashed.