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## Southern Gateway in the limelight for mega projects

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IT is all happening in Johor now! The nation's attention is now focused on Johor as it carves a niche as the number one spot for "mega projects" in the country.

Johor Baru has taken the limelight with a series of spectacular infrastructure projects designed to turn it from a city into a modern metropolis.

At last count, some RM20 billion in Federal, State and private investments had already been committed on projects - scheduled to materialise within the next three to five years.

The shape of things to come has stirred great excitement among politicians, businessmen and ordinary citizens in Johor.

For years, they have watched with envy as Johor Baru - the Southern Gateway to Malaysia - was skipped by the political masters and decision makers as Kuala Lumpur, Putrajaya, Langkawi and Penang stole the limelight.

But now, the focus has shifted to Johor and the projects earmarked are equally grandiose and awe inspiring.

Johor Menteri Besar Datuk Abdul Ghani Othman said the rapid structural changes under way would lift Johor Baru from the status of a backwater town to a boom city.

"It is going to be a radical transformation," he cautioned, adding that Johor Baru was destined to become the next new commercial and financial hub of the south.

And the flagship of these changes will be the Southern Integrated Gateway (SIG) - a spectacular RM3.26 billion project that will completely alter Johor Baru's skyline and landscape.

To be ready by early 2006, the project comprises a signature elevated 1.4km bridge that will partially replace the existing Causeway, which has been the main mode of land and rail transport between Johor Baru and Singapore for over 80 years.

Costing a whopping RM1 billion, the bridge shaped like a harp and including a special swing rail bridge, is scheduled for completion by December 2005.

Another key feature of this development is the building of a RM2.26 billion Customs, Immigration and Quarantine (CIQ) complex, which will be completed two months before the bridge is completed.

Ghani said the SIG development was significant on two counts.

"Firstly, it will open up the Tebrau Straits for recreational boating and other water sports activities. More importantly, because of the sheer scope and grand design of the bridge, it will propel and help position Johor Baru as a major international Gateway to Malaysia."

Yet another ambitious project, which will complement the SIG, is the Danga Bay Development coming up just a stone's throw from the existing Causeway.

Stretching from Tanjung Puteri to Danga Bay, this mixed ultramodern recreational, commercial and residential project is coming up along the popular Lido Beach in Johor Baru.

To be developed in phases over 15 years, the massive project spread over 562ha of waterfront land at the estuary of three rivers fronting the Tebrau Straits - Sungai Danga, Sungai Skudai and Sungai Melayu - is an integrated lifestyle development.

It is designed to become a city within a city, with an exclusive residential enclave, a financial centre, a shopping and commercial belt and a host of tourist attractions.

"The Danga Bay development concept is unique in that it is designed to transform Johor Baru's popular Lido Beach into a top-notch family holiday and tourist destination.

"It will make up for the dearth of social amenities and public facilities in the state capital," said Danga Bay Sdn Bhd (DBSB) director Kamarul Ariffin Sulaiman.

"More than half of the designated land area will comprise public areas and green zones. This is what makes the project so unique," he said.

DBSB is the developer of Danga Bay, although the project itself will be jointly-managed by Ekovest Bhd and Pembinaan Limbongan Setia (PLS) Bhd.

The Johor Government's involvement in the project is through its development arm - Kumpulan Prasarana Rakyat Johor (KPRJ) - which is the landowner. KPRJ also has a 25.7 per cent equity in PLS.

To date, the residential parcel of the Danga Bay Development has already been completed and sold, while work will soon commence on the RM200 million Festive Street Mall.

Scheduled for opening by 2006 or early 2007, it will comprise a 31-storey shopping mall offering some 1.2 million sq ft of retail space.

Also incorporated in this phase of the development is a serviced apartment, a 200,000 sq ft convention centre and a 300-room hotel.

The project masterplan further features a cruise ship and ferry terminal with full CIQ facilities. This will complement the elevated Gerbang Perdana bridge at the existing Causeway.

"The idea is to deploy cruise ships and possibly even hovercrafts, that will be able to ply through the new Causeway bridge to Pulau Tioman and beyond on the east coast or to Malacca on the western side of Johor," he explained.

Danga Day, when fully developed will also feature a water theme park, a marina with its own exclusive yacht club and a host of other commercial and public attractions.

Then there is Senai.

Under a Federal Government plan, Senai airport is to be transformed into a major logistics hub to complement the Port of Tanjung Pelepas in Gelang Patah.

The plan calls for the buyout of Senai airport by Senai Airport Terminal Services Sdn Bhd (SATS) - a company closely linked to business tycoon Tan Sri Syed Mokhtar Al-Bukhary.

When realised, it will see the entire stretch from Senai to PTP emerge of a super growth corridor complete with with transportation, logistics, bunkering and related services.

At nearby PTP, exciting development is also taking shape, including the building of a new petrochemical complex, a coal-fired power generating plant, as well as world-class warehousing and related facilities.

Another RM1.2 billion project is also taking shape - a new highway and bridge to provide fast and convenient road link between the western and eastern coasts of Johor.

Called the East-West Highway, it is being spearheaded by Konsortium KPRJ Rancak Bistari Sdn Bhd, which is associated with the Ranhill Group. Construction works have commenced. The 75km highway will link Universiti Teknologi Malaysia in Senai with Desaru, bypassing the Pasir Gudang Highway.

The project also includes a RM400 million bridge across Sungai Johor from Kong Kong on the west to Teluk Sengat in Kota Tinggi.

Then, there is the RM800 million that will be needed to build a 48km

four-lane highway linking Johor Baru to Pasir Gudang - the industrial showcase of Johor.

All these projects will undoubtedly change the face of Johor in the coming years. It would bring Johor Baru closer to other cities in the First World.

It is reassuring to know that the Federal Government is committed and determined to bring it all to pass. Especially when Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad pledged on Valentine's Day this year: "For the sake of Johoreans, we will spend".