

## **Two councillors break ranks to oppose MPPP budget**

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**By Susan Loone**

Two local councillors today objected to the RM50 million expenditure on the controversial subterranean Penang International Convention and Exhibition Centre, dubbed sPICE.

The duo - Lim Boo Chang from PKR and Lim Mah Hui, a representative of the Penang NGO Forum - put on record their opposition at the Penang Municipal Council's (MPPP) budget presentation today.

NONEDuring the meeting, Boo Chang (right) said he was shocked that the council had been asked to carry out the RM300 million project on the instructions of the state government.

Boo Chang, who has been a councillor for nine years, said this was the first time in history that he had witnessed the autonomy of the council being challenged in this manner.

He conceded that he was part of the councillors who agreed to the project in principle but had issues with the terms and conditions of the agreement, which was signed without the knowledge of all the councillors.

Last month, the councillors, led by Mah Hui, collected signatures and demanded a special briefing session with the state government over the sPICE project.

However, Boo Chang said despite the councillors writing in to asked MPPP chief Pattahiyah Ismail for the agreement between the council and developer Eco Meridian Sdn Bhd - a subsidiary of SP Setia Berhad - no such document had been forthcoming until today.

"We are allowing a dangerous precedent, which means in future, the state government can ask for a RM100 million or RM200 million project to be carried out and the MPPP would just comply," said the PKR appointed councillor.

"It appears as if the MPPP's autonomy has been jeopardised," added Boo Chang, who was also a councillor under the Barisan Nasional leadership.

The project has been described by Barisan Nasional as the Penang government's 'scandal of the decade', but state executive council member and Tanjung MP Chow Kon Yeow insisted that it would be a winner.

BN leaders and NGOs claimed that the project, located in Relau, would only benefit the developer and not the public due to its lopsided agreement favouring the former.

'Walk the talk', state gov't urged

Boo Chang, who is Bukit Gelugor PKR division chief, said he joined the party - after leaving MCA - because of the CAT (competency, accountability and transparency) principles of the state government. However, he urged the state, led by Chief Minister Lim Guan Eng, to "walk the talk" because as far as he knew, the state can only intervene or give instruction on policy matters, not on the budget.

NONE"We are policymakers, but what have we become now? So, in the interest of democracy and our dignity, I cannot support this budget, although I do not protest to the entire budget, but the portion on sPICE," he said.

Boo Chang wondered why the agreement was not publicised if the state government had nothing to hide, saying local councillors had the right to insist that they had access to such information.

He said the council must not be regarded as synonymous with the state government as the former had its own autonomy in deciding projects and issues of public interest.

He added the councillors must “jealously guard the power” bestowed on them and urged them to always seek transparency from the state government.

DAP appointed councillor Tan Hun Woon defended the state, saying it had only issued a general order to the MPPP that Penang needed a convention and exhibition centre.

Tan said the state government had a choice to select the venue and design of the said building, which includes a seven-acre rooftop garden open to the public.

NONE “When the matter was discussed last year in the council, Boo Chang had not objected to the project,” he added.

During the meeting, Pattahiyah (left) tried to prevent a potentially argumentative situation from arising by cutting short the debate between councillors.

“We do not want this forum to become a platform for debate because then we cannot complete the session. After all, the budget has been approved,” she said.

Another councillor, Mah Hui, who objected to the budget on sPICE left the meeting earlier, but when contacted, conceded that he disagreed with the council using its money to fund the massive project.

Mah Hui said he was not convinced about the project and urged the council to review it so that it benefits the people and not developers.

Asked what would be his next course of action, he merely replied, “I don’t know”.