

Activist: Second Penang bridge 'no big deal'
MalaysiaKini.com
Mar 3, 2014

While social networking sites are inundated with pictures and glowing commentaries on the much glorified second Penang bridge, not everybody is impressed with it.

One local activist described the link, opened by Prime Minister Najib Abdul Razak last Saturday amidst much pomp and fanfare, as “nothing great and no big deal”, although the bridge is touted to be the longest in Southeast Asia.

Also witnessing the launch were two former prime ministers, Dr Mahathir Mohamed and Abdullah Ahmad Badawi, former Penang chief minister Koh Tsu Koon and current Chief Minister Lim Guan Eng.

The “hidden agenda” of the then BN government under Koh, the former Gerakan president, when approving the bridge before the 2008 general election was to cater to “gamblers”, Penang Consumer Protection Association president Koris Atan said today.

Koris claimed that these “gamblers” were to use the link to go the Penang Turf Club, which was then slated to be relocated in Batu Kawan on mainland Penang.

“The plan to relocate the turf club to Batu Kawan was eventually shelved. We need to jog the memories of Penangites who forget easily the BN's hidden agenda to build the bridge,” Koris told Malaysiakini.

“So the second bridge is nothing special and no big deal. It was a mistake to build another bridge so close to the first bridge.

“The right thing to do would be to build the bridge on the northern side - from Tanjung Tokong to Kepala Batas. That would have been a better traffic dispersal system,” Koris said.

“It would then be a circular transport dispersal system. It is senseless for people from the north of the island to travel to the south to exit from Penang. This causes more traffic congestion, as is evident now.”

Koris was not wrong about the massive traffic congestion on roads leading to the new 24km bridge, linking Batu Maung, where the Free Trade Zone is located, to Batu Kawan, a fast developing township on the mainland.

Malaysiakini surveyed the area at 8.30 last night and found cars bumper-to-bumper along the Batu Maung road leading to the bridge, which also saw vehicles trudging along at a slow pace, on both sides of the divide, especially along the middle span, where many parked their cars to

enjoy the breathtaking view of the open sea while snapping pictures of themselves.

It took one-and-a-half hours to reach Batu Kawan last night, although it is supposed to take only 20 minutes to cross the bridge from either side.

Seafood restaurants packed

There was also massive traffic congestion in Batu Kawan, along the road leading to the seafood restaurants in Tambun, and on the road leading to the North-South Expressway.

Most seafood restaurants were packed with people, with their parking spaces filled to the brim.

In Tambun, a restaurant turned away customers because it was so packed that it had “nothing left to cook” signalling massive economic growth for the area, especially for seafood eateries and related businesses.

Koris said the situation therefore called for the undersea tunnel project, which many oppose, especially environmentalists, to be constructed sooner, rather than later.

Dubbed the third link, the 7.2 km under-seabed tunnel, which needs 12 years to complete, has been proposed to link Gurney Drive with Bagan Ajam in Butterworth on the mainland.

This proposal also includes a four-lane highway from Tanjung Bungah to Teluk Bahang, a four-lane highway from Air Itam to the Tun Dr Lim Chong Eu Expressway and another four-lane highway from the expressway to Gurney Drive.

If approved, Chinese construction company Beijing Urban Construction Group will team up with local agent Consortium Zenith BUCG Sdn Bhd in a joint venture to carry out the RM6.3 billion project.

“Why wait until 2016, when the tunnel is supposed to be constructed? It should be done as soon as possible or else in just a few years, the traffic congestion would be worse off than it is now.

“Why are people opposing the tunnel when that too was proposed during the BN rule?” Koris asked.

“This is food for thought and to restore the memories of Penangites, who seem to be so mesmerised by the second Penang bridge and have forgotten the story and personalities behind it, and how it is not an answer to the island's current traffic woes.”

Why traffic dispersal not put in place first?

Koris, a member of corruption watchdog Transparency International-Malaysia, questioned why an external traffic dispersal system was not put in place before the bridge was completed.

It is learnt that the four traffic dispersal projects, with one on the mainland, are yet to be completed.

These are the upgrading of Jalan Permatang Damar Laut, an elevated highway from the bridge along Tun Dr Lim Chong Eu Expressway to Queensbay Mall and the widening of roads from Bayan Lepas, where the Penang International Airport is located, to Teluk Kumbar, the entry to the southwest part of the island, Balik Pulau.

The road project along Bandar Cassia in Batu Kawan is also yet to be finished, causing a traffic mess on the mainland road leading to the second bridge.

Koris also questioned why these traffic dispersal projects were not done simultaneously with the building of the second bridge, which took six years to complete.

"Is this to punish Penangites for voting in the opposition?" he asked.

"The external roads leading to the bridge may take another three years to complete. Why are we made to suffer with these the daily traffic jams?" he asked.

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Source: <http://www.malysiakini.com/news/255933>