

70% toll hike slated for Penang bridge

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Secret plans are afoot to increase the toll rates for the Penang bridge, to be implemented after the general election, disclosed opposition party PKR today.
MCPX

penang bridgeThe party revealed that the increment would be by almost 70 percent, putting a bigger dent in the pockets of locals who are already reeling with the increase in the prices of daily necessary items.

PKR - quoting a confidential correspondence between the bridge concessionaire and the federal government - said that the toll increment was to be on par with the rate fixed for the new second bridge.

The toll rate for the new bridge, which has started construction works, is fixed at RM9.40.

PKR's Pantai Jerejak state seat candidate Sim Tze Tzin made this revelation today citing a purported letter between United Engineers (Malaysia) Berhad (UEM) chief executive officer Ahmad Pardas Senin to the Economic Planning Unit in the Prime Minister's Department's director-general Dr Sulaiman Mahbob.

At present, there are two different rates for cars plying the Penang bridge. Prepaid travel card Touch and Go users enjoy a discounted rate of RM5.60 while regular users pay RM7.00. Toll is only collected one-way.

Sim, who claimed to have seen the document, said that the letter also pointed to the abolishment of the existing Touch and Go discounts.

The new rate - if it is the same as the second bridge rate of RM9.40 - amounts to a 68 percent increase for Touch and Go users while regular drivers will have to fork out an extra 34 percent.

Referring to the letter, Sim said the toll rates at the Penang bridge are due anyway for a two percent annual increase and compounded every five years to a maximum of RM11.50 until the year 2051.

Sim declined to reveal as the source who leaked the correspondence but told reporters that it was dated August 2007.

The new 24-kilometer bridge - connecting the town of Batu Maung on the island and Batu Kawan on the mainland - was launched in November last year and costs an estimated RM3 billion.

United Engineers (Malaysia) Berhad, a major infrastructure player linked to Umno, is tasked with the construction of the two-lane bridge. Its CEO Ahmad Pardas could not be reached for comment.

Koh refuses to comment

When questioned at a separate press conference later, outgoing Penang Chief Minister Dr Koh Tsu Koon dodged questions regarding the Penang bridge toll hike and declined to provide a direct answer.

koh tsu koon motorola pc 040308 explain "We will continue to assess the situation and fight for the people of Penang," Koh, who is also Gerakan acting president, said at the party's Penang office after being grilled on the matter.

However in an apparent justification for the possible toll hike, Koh reminded Penangites that the people's money is involved no matter what the government's decision will be.

"If the government decides not to have the hike, the government will have to pay compensation to the concessionaire, which is also taxpayers' money," he pointed out.

Commenting that he should be judged by his previous track record, a defensive Koh told reporters to direct the question at PKR de facto leader Anwar Ibrahim as he said the toll concession agreement was drafted in 1993 when the latter was still in cabinet.

"Under the agreement, there were supposed to be two increases in the toll price in 1998 and 2003 but I had lobbied very hard for the rate not to be increased," he argued, adding that his both attempts were successful.

Koh said that the rates were not increased on those two occasions as the country was affected by the financial crisis in 1998 while 2003 saw the onslaught of the deadly Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (Sars) virus and the Sept 11 tragedy.

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