

Gadgets cannot replace integrity

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EARLY last year Selangor executive councillors were given cameras to "take photographs of clogged drains, potholes and illegal dumps to be submitted to local councils for immediate action". The taxpayers are still owed a report on how effective the cameras have been.

Recently, Petaling Jaya city councillors were given 10-megapixel cameras to photograph problem areas and table them in meetings or send them to the relevant departments for action.

While it is commendable that Petaling Jaya City Council is making use of the latest technology to try to improve urban management, by the time there are heaps of rubbish or clogged drains to be photographed, nearby residents would have suffered inconveniences or difficulties.

The city councillors are not municipal inspectors. Their major roles are to pass policies and by-laws and ensure that these are implemented. They also perform some executive functions such as approving layout plans and building plans and hearing appeals to reduce assessment rates.

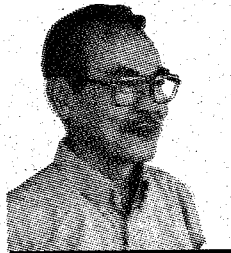
Although they should notify the council about problems if and when they spot them, such a role does not warrant carrying cameras paid for by the rate-payers.

Surely the city council has a maintenance system to ensure that all infrastructure and facilities are in good order. Surely it has a monitoring system to detect and rectify problems. The council has hundreds of officers ranging from directors to inspectors and enforcement officers to perform these duties. Besides, why do councillors need photographs to convince their colleagues and officers that things are not right or actions need to be taken? Surely, they are able to convey a problem verbally or through short-message service (sms).

If city officers need photographic proof to show that there are problems before they act, there is indeed a problem of management in Petaling Jaya.

Instead of spending time and energy taking photographs of rubbish heaps and clogged drains, the councillors should be questioning why they are left unattended when there are officers and inspectors and why there should be problems in the first place. Are the problems due to poor monitoring system, shortage of staff, inefficiency of the officers or political interference?

If there is a need for feedback, a more



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effective system than camera-toting councillors is a reporting system that facilitates all the rate-payers in Petaling Jaya to notify the council of any problem.

There is already an "aduan" facility in the Petaling Jaya City Council website. What is needed is to make it more user-friendly and allow photographs to be posted in addition to text messages.

Furthermore, all complaints should be acknowledged and given a reply that is more than "action will be taken". The office of the city secretary should monitor the

"aduan" site round the clock.

With many Petaling Jaya residents having handphone cameras, such a site would be more efficient in notifying problems than the 24 camera-toting councillors, even if they diligently go around the city looking for failed infrastructure or services.

In and by itself, giving cameras to the councillors is no big deal, especially to relatively rich Petaling Jaya. But it sets a bad example as councillors elsewhere are also interested in "free" 10-megapixel cameras.

Worse, it tends to divert attention from the real problems. There is a false belief that high-tech gadgets can improve productivity without strict scrutiny on their suitability.

For instance, some local authorities, including Petaling Jaya City Council, have given their councillors lap-tops. It would be useful to find out whether these have improved the administration of the councils and the management of the towns and cities.

Have the computers, for example, been used to reduce the huge amount of printed paper that is sent by hand to the councillors every month? This would have saved on not only the costs of paper and printing, but also those of delivery.

More than 40 years ago when there were no handphones and lap-tops and councillors were not given cameras, Ipoh municipality was very well managed. It was reputed to be the cleanest in the country. The "secret" was integrity of the leaders.

Until scientists invent cameras and computers that can compensate for lack of integrity, local councils should emphasise on human development and go slow on purchase of gadgets.

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