

**New Causeway toll likely fodder for Pakatan in Johor**  
**The Malaysian Insider**  
**December 07, 2011**  
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KUALA LUMPUR, Dec 7 — A new toll for the Causeway next year making it six times as expensive for roundtrips between Johor Baru and Singapore is set to be a major election issue in the Umno bastion and birthplace of Johor.

The Malaysian Insider understands project owner Malaysian Resources Corporation Berhad (MRCB) has proposed a RM9.10 toll in each direction for passenger vehicles using its RM1 billion Eastern Dispersal Link (EDL) highway from the Causeway to the immigration post.

However, the Umno-linked company is using an open toll system that charges the full fare at the new Custom, Immigration and Quarantine (CIQ) checkpoint regardless of where motorists exit or enter the highway — the latest facility for the ambitious Iskandar zone that celebrates its five-year anniversary this weekend.

The rest of the 8.1km stretch leading to the Pandan interchange of the North-South Highway will be free to local motorists.

With Prime Minister Datuk Seri Najib Razak set to call a general election soon, sources said Putrajaya may be forced to delay or subsidise the toll that could be up to six times the current charge for roundtrips across the one kilometre bridge spanning both countries.

MRCB officials briefed the media and local stakeholders yesterday ahead of plans to launch the highway and tollbooths built at the CIQ complex in the first quarter of 2012.

The Malaysian Insider also learnt that local business leaders were concerned that, with the new CIQ already taking Singaporean tourists away from downturn Johor Baru, the EDL will see them skip the more inland Tebrau area as well.

Taxi drivers also called for an exemption as it would otherwise be unfeasible to ferry passengers across the Causeway.

When contacted by The Malaysian Insider, an MRCB spokesman said “we cannot comment on the toll because that is up to the government.”

However, the spokesman confirmed that toll will be levied on vehicles heading in both directions across the Causeway but local motorists within Johor be able to use the EDL free of charge.

“MRCB insists it won’t be major election issue but they refuse to make any statement on pricing. It will be suicide for the government to introduce the toll before elections,” a source close to the project told The Malaysian Insider.

Over 50,000 vehicles cross the bridge daily, mostly Malaysians living in and around the state capital who commute to the island republic to work.

Johor Baru’s economy is also heavily reliant on Singaporeans who cross the Straits of Johor to enjoy cheaper prices there. Putrajaya set up the Iskandar zone five years ago to turn Johor Baru and its surrounding region into an economic growth area catering to the spillover

from Singapore.

Cars and lorries exiting Singapore and heading into Johor now pay RM2.90 and RM5.50 respectively to use the bridge while motorcycles, which make up more than half of traffic across the Causeway, are exempt from the toll.

Singapore's Straits Times reported in 2008 that the toll charges for the EDL will range from RM6.20 for passenger vehicles to RM12.40 for lorries entering Malaysia.

But with commuters being charged the combined fare in both directions, roundtrips on the 88-year-old bridge will cost five times more.

The English-language daily reported that rates will be raised every three years of the 30-year concession and will peak at RM14.60 for passenger vehicles and RM29.20 for lorries.

It also said the Causeway served 69 million person trips annually, nearly four times the annual traffic at the Kuala Lumpur International Airport, and that 75 per cent of the passenger cars crossing the bridge were Singapore-registered vehicles.

"It is a foregone conclusion that businesses in JB will be hit hard," Johor Baru Small-Medium Enterprises Association president Teh Kee Sin told The Malaysian Insider.

Johor Baru MP Datuk Seri Shahrir Samad also said that "Malaysians working in Singapore will be upset" and called for the current RM2.90 fee to be abolished once the EDL is operational "as there is no logic to pay two different fees to use the same road."

PKR held its national congress in Johor a fortnight ago, calling it a signal that it is ready to take over the state despite not winning a single seat in the Umno fortress at the last general election.

Although Election 2008 saw Pakatan Rakyat (PR) deny Barisan Nasional (BN) its customary two-thirds majority of Parliament and five state governments, Johor saw the ruling coalition sweep all but six state and one federal seat out of the 56 and 26 at stake respectively.

Umno MPs Shahrir and Datuk Nur Jazlan Mohamed from the neighbouring Pulai constituency retained their seats with comfortable 25,349 and 20,449-vote majorities respectively.

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