

Sarawak to invest RM1b in ICT, says CM

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Abang Johari Openg says the state needs a proper infrastructure system for a digital economy to draw investors and create jobs.

KUCHING: Sarawak will see thousands of new communication towers constructed to lay the foundation of a digital economy in the hopes of creating more jobs by drawing investors to the state, says Chief Minister Abang Johari Openg.

Speaking at the launch of a conference on digital economy today, Abang Johari described the state as currently being a technological backwater.

“I learn that, as we are now talking about the Digital Economy, we are in fact already far behind in the technology cycle,” Abang Johari said at the International ICT Infrastructure and Digital Economy Conference Sarawak (IDECS) today.

“To catch up on the Digital Economy, we know that Sarawak needs to build a world-class ICT infrastructure,” he said, adding that currently Sarawak had a basic ICT infrastructure for personal use in selected spots, but it was not good enough to build the future of the Sarawak economy on.

Citing the need to develop further in the digital economy, the chief minister announced the state’s plan to invest RM1 billion in the construction of more telecommunication infrastructure, increasing the number of communication towers from the current 1,200 to over 5,000.

“For Sarawak to have adequate network coverage, 1,000 towers are not enough. Not even 2,000 towers. I want 5,000 towers in Sarawak. We must reach every settlement and close the gap and cover all blind spots,” he said.

Abang Johari said the average wired network speed for Sarawak was 4 megabits per second (Mbps) per household, which is nearly seven times slower than South Korea’s average network speed of 29 Mbps per household.

He said the state government “must take the lead” in driving the development of physical ICT infrastructure, rather than depend on commercial operators and service providers.

“I am committed to invest RM1 billion as a start to ensure our ICT Infrastructure is fit to support the digital industries, commerce and investments that will be lured to Sarawak,” he said.

This includes “opening up the field” to more commercial operators and embracing data transmission by optical fibre links.

“This means that the Sarawak government may have to own our own physical networks – as South Korea is doing,” he said, adding that the state may have to integrate and utilise its electricity with telecommunications.

Abang Johari added the state may also set up its own Sarawak Multimedia and Communications Authority. Also in the pipeline were plans for a digital village in Samajaya, which Abang Johari said would be the state’s version of California’s Silicon Valley.

Sarawak currently has about 1,200 communication towers. Broadband coverage in Sarawak reaches 51.8% of households, while among the populated areas, broadband coverage is 72.1% with blind spots. There is almost no coverage for sparsely-populated areas.

The two-day conference, attended by 1,500 delegates, features 19 speakers who are experts in the field of digital economy.

Speakers include bestselling technology writer Don Tapscott, Stanford University communication director Prof Jeremy Bailenson, Grab (Malaysia) country head Sean Goh and International Data Corporation (IDC) Europe chief analyst Philip Carter.

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