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Letter to the Editor

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**SUNWAY GROUP SHOULD ‘WALK THE TALK’
ON PRIORITISING PEOPLE AND THE PLANET**

Sahabat Alam Malaysia (SAM) welcomes recent comments reported by the media by Tan Sri Dr. Jeffrey Cheah, the Chairman of the Sunway Group, on the need for a new iteration of economic growth that prioritises people and the planet; (See 2 July, The Star).

The media reports referred to the Sunway Group’s commitment to the sustainability agenda in advancing the U.N. Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in the Asia region.

While we welcome the Tan Sri’s public efforts in promoting the sustainability agenda, SAM would like to remind him on the need for the Sunway Group to walk the talk.

We had in fact written a letter to the good Tan Sri in February last year, over the concerns SAM and other civil society groups had over a Sunway City project, (a member of the Sunway Group), on environmentally sensitive hill land in Sungei Ara, Penang, which we believe is contrary to the sustainability agenda, and prioritises profits over people and the planet.

Regrettably, we have yet to receive any response to our letter from the Tan Sri.

We had pointed out that the project, known as Sunway Hills in Sungei Ara, Penang, involves housing development on sensitive hill land, that is land with more than 250 feet (76 metres) above sea level and a gradient exceeding 25 degrees.

Sunway has proposed the construction of 600 units comprising high-rise apartments and bungalows on hill lands covering 80 acres, approximately 43% of which are on slopes exceeding a gradient of 25 degrees.

The project is on land originally designated as “hill land” under the Land Conservation Act 1960. However, in December 2011, the State Authority approved Sunway’s application for removal of the “hill land” status.

Planning permission for the development was given by the local authority in Penang in Feb 2012 and some Sungei Ara residents filed an appeal to the Penang Appeals Board against the decision of the MBPP in 2012. On 27 Jan 2016, the Penang Appeals Board upheld the objections by the residents who were owners of neighbouring lands against the approval of the project by the Majlis Bandaraya Pulau Pinang (MBPP).

The Appeals Board ruled that the MBPP was wrong in granting planning permission as it had failed to consider

properly that (in this case), the primary objective of the Penang Structure Plan 2020 is to preserve hill lands; and only very limited and justifiable exceptions were allowed as 'special projects', which justification was lacking in the Sunway project.

Sunway City filed a judicial review to the Penang High Court against the decision of the Appeals Board; and in May 2017, the High Court decided in favour of Sunway City.

In June 2017, the Sungei Ara residents filed an appeal to the Court of Appeal, challenging the decision of the High Court and this appeal is currently pending a decision by the Court of Appeal, following a hearing more than one year ago.

The Sungei Ara residents appeal has garnered the support from 19 other residents' associations and management corporations and committees in Penang, as the High Court decision has very serious implications not only for the immediate residents of the vicinity of the project but also for all citizens of Penang, who will be affected by development projects in environmentally sensitive areas, including on hillslopes and highlands in Penang.

We deeply regret that Tan Sri Jeffrey Cheah and Sunway as so-called champions of the SDGs are embroiled in this controversial housing project against ordinary residents in Penang who are fighting to protect the environment.

This case shows that Sunway does not practise what it preaches as regards the SDGs, as the housing development proposed cannot be regarded as being 'sustainable.'

We write this letter to point out that the Tan Sri and the Sunway Group must walk the talk and if they put people and the planet above profits, this housing project on the Sungei Ara hills should not proceed.

Mageswari Sangaralingam
Hon Secretary
Sahabat Alam Malaysia