



# Persatuan Pengguna Pulau Pinang Consumers Association of Penang

檳城消費人協會 பிளாங்கு பயனீட்டாளர் சங்கம்

Websites:  
[www.consumer.org.my](http://www.consumer.org.my)

10 Jalan Masjid Negeri, 11600 Pulau Pinang, Malaysia  
Tel: 604-8299511 Fax: 604-8298109  
email: [consumerofpenang@gmail.com](mailto:consumerofpenang@gmail.com)

Press Statement

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## **Penang Speedboat: A Time Bomb for Covid-19 Spike**

The Consumers Association of Penang (CAP) is of the opinion that the implementation of the Penang speedboat had been done without considering many crucial factors that will adversely affect foot pedestrians.

What is of great concern is that there are no social distancing measures in place for the entire travel process, from the speedboat to the shuttle buses arranged to ferry commuters to the bus station in Weld Quay. This is shocking and totally unacceptable in light of the current massive spikes in Covid-19 cases in the community that the country is now experiencing amid the more dangerous Third Wave infections.

Inside the speedboats, commuters have to sit close to one another in an enclosed and air-conditioned environment. In such an environment the spread of any airborne disease, including Covid-19, would be very much higher than the well-ventilated 'old' ferries that we had. In fact, the old ferries had social distancing measures (marked seats and floors to avoid close-contact when sitting and queuing), crucial measures which are not implemented for the speedboats.

There are also no social distancing SOPs in place when the speedboat passengers later queue and take the connecting shuttle bus that has been arranged to take them to the Weld Quay bus station. The shuttle bus is often packed with passengers, who have to wait inside for some time before it moves as the bus follows a time schedule. This increases passengers' risk further.

The speedboat is also not meant for bigger sized people because all the seats are about 40 cm wide. It is also not meant for the physically challenged because of the numerous obstacles along the way and the long distance to walk to the point of embarking or exiting the terminal after disembarking the speed boat.

Although it was reported that wheelchair-bound persons will be carried into the boats by the Penang Port Commission (PPC) attendants, both terminals – the Swettenham Pier in George Town and Pengkalan Sultan Abdul Halim, Butterworth – do not comply with the Malaysian Standard Code of Practice on Access of Disabled Persons (MS) as required of all public transport stations.

Such requirements is not new because the Persons with Disabilities Act 2008 emphasised that persons with disabilities (PWD) shall have the same rights to access and use public facilities, amenities, services and buildings. Besides PWDs are quite independent in moving around but having such obstacles such as steps and steep ramps, forcing them to depend on assistance by the attendants is denigrating.

Only the Swettenham Pier building has escalators but still commuters will be drenched if it rains because of the unsheltered walkway from the gate to the main building. A canopy should be constructed between the gate and the Swettenham Pier building.

Moreover, it is quite a distance between the entrance to the ferry terminal to the point of boarding the speedboat on either side of the Penang channel. Baggage lugging passengers will experience a nightmare because they have to negotiate steps, steep ramps, narrow walkways, and having to step over the bulwark to the deck.

Are the speedboats only used during the interim period between the ‘retirement’ of the old ferries and awaiting the arrival of the catamarans in mid-2021? If so, why weren’t the ferries continued to be used for another six months or so? Even then how will the pedestrian commuter route to the terminals be configured? Will lifts (large enough for wheelchairs) be considered?

Instead of depending on vans to send those less able, those who are pregnant, or with heavy luggage to the boat, why don’t PPC consider lifts since such are meant as long-term features for the terminals.

Also, the free shuttle buses that normally ply between Weld Quay station to Komtar should be provided at the Swettenhem Pier itself to reduce the inconveniences faced by commuters, particularly if they are in a hurry to go to work.

It is regrettable that the ferry issue was hastily rushed through with little thought given to the impacts on the ferry users, especially to their safety in the current worsening Covid-19 situation.

MOHIDEEN ABDUL KADER  
President  
Consumers Association of Penang