



Persatuan Pengguna Pulau Pinang Consumers Association of Penang

檳城消費人協會 பிளாங்கு பயனீட்டாளர் சங்கம்

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Press Statement

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LITTLE INDIA IS A POTENTIAL FIRE HAZARD

The Consumers' Association of Penang (CAP) wishes to differ from the Malaysian Indian Chamber of Commerce and Industry, Penang (MICCI) president Datuk N. Gobalakrishnan's opinion and that of the Penang Island City Council (MBPP) on the setting up of temporary canopies in Little India.

It is not only that the haphazard erection of canopies obstruct fire engines and ambulances from entering Little India but the buildings themselves are a fire hazard.

There were 700 cases of house fires in the first three months of 2016 alone; 1,816 in 2015; 3,066 in 2014; and 3,235 in 2013. In August 2015 a fire broke out at a clothing and sundry shop in Little India. It took 71 firemen from various fire stations close to seven hours to put out the blaze. Deepavali fell on 10 November that year. Imagine what would have happened if the fire had happened during the first week of November.

We would like to point out that many of these shop-houses have a staircase, either towards the front of the house or to the rear. Although it is usual for houses to have one staircase, given the age and design of pre-war houses, these are certainly death traps.

While some of the narrow backlanes have been obstructed by vehicles parking there, a few of the buildings even had their backdoors padlocked. As many of the houses dated back to the early to mid-19th century, some of them were built back-to-back without a backdoor! Residents of these houses without a backdoor can only flee through the front windows but the windows may have grills or are obstructed by oversized signboards.

The prospect is horrifying if the fire starts from the ground floor during the night because its occupants might not be able to escape. The staircase serves as a 'chimney' for the hot gases and smoke from the highly combustible materials to rise into the upper floor thereby trapping the occupants.

It is impossible to dismantle the canopy to rescue anybody at the front window even if there is no window grille to deal with because in a fire fuelled by highly flammable material (synthetic material, oils, or cooking gas), every second counts.

For the occupants to safely climb down a ladder the 'four-to-one' rule applies. The rule states that for every four feet of height you have to climb, the base of the ladder has to move a foot away from the wall. With the canopy fronting the full width of a building, a ladder would not be able to lean on the building since for a vertical 20-foot climb you need to place the ladder between five to six feet away from the wall. Do we have that space to spare? No!

Hence, we wonder how the MBPP and the MICCI managed to overlook this critical issue of Little India being a huge fire risk. We also understand that many of these shop-houses have people living in them and this demands even greater concern.

We wonder if the Fire and Rescue Department had been consulted about the erection of canopies especially when fire safety is its prime concern. Why have various quarters been dragging their feet to get the canopies removed?

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