



Persatuan Pengguna Pulau Pinang Consumers Association of Penang

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Letter to Editor

2 June 2021

SUPPORT CALL FOR PENANG RECLAMATION PROJECT TO BE CANCELLED

The Consumers Association of Penang (CAP) and Sahabat Alam Malaysia (SAM) support the call by Nurul Izzah Anwar, the Permatang Pauh member of parliament, for the Penang South Reclamation (PSR) project to be cancelled.

We also wish to respond to the comments by Zairil Khir Johari, the Penang State Infrastructure and Transport Committee chairman yesterday, who among other things, claimed that the project has been identified by the state as a “key recovery driver of the state”.

Zairil relies on a what he says is an “independent study” prepared by Pricewaterhouse Coopers (PwC) based on Penang's previous industrialisation trajectory that “would bring in RM70 billion of FDI (foreign direct investments) and create more than 300,000 jobs over a 30-year timeframe.”

We have not seen this study and have therefore no way of verifying when it was done - i.e. whether before the country and the world have been engulfed in the raging COVID-19 pandemic with significant consequences for all economies. Neither are we privy to the assumptions contained in the study to accept its' claims.

Further, the PwC study was not previously cited as the basis for the PSR project but appears now as an afterthought, following strong opposition to the project from NGOs and others, based on sound scientific and socio-economic grounds.

Moreover, according to a recent report by UN Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD) released last year, “The economic fallout from the COVID-19 shock is ongoing and increasingly difficult to predict but there are clear indications that things will get much worse for developing economies before they get better.” So, there are grave uncertainties on the economic front and claims of FDIs flowing in will need to be interrogated further.

In any case, the root of the issue really is this - why reclaim 4,500 acres of land in what are environmentally sensitive areas? The fact that the project site affects environmentally sensitive areas is not disputed.

The reclamation of the 3 islands will involve the dumping of about 190 million cubic meters of fill material comprised of sand and rock into our ocean. This does not take into account the vast scale of material that will need to be sourced from outside this area, and what impacts that involves.

This amounts to the size of 76,000 Olympic size swimming pools being built in the sea. Because the reclamation is happening underwater, the immensity of the scale and the likely damage this results in goes unnoticed and is invisible. Imagine if this was on land!

Even the Department of Environment (DOE) when approving the Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) for the project, acknowledged that there will be permanent negative impacts which are significant for fishery resources, the fishermen and for the nation's food security.

This approval by the DOE Director-General (DG) is being challenged by a group of fishermen who will be adversely affected by the project through a legal process allowed under the Environmental Quality Act, '74 and is pending hearing which will take place middle of next month. The fishermen's appeal provides an opportunity to fundamentally review the DG's approval of the EIA as to its soundness.

All the claims of the environmental soundness of this project by the Penang state including as to the mitigation and offset measures to be undertaken are being legally challenged and is the subject of major dispute.

The fact of this appeal is being ignored by the Penang state government, who intend to proceed with the project anyway without awaiting its outcome, contrary to good governance and respect for the rule of law.

So, back to the root of the controversy - why sacrifice prime environmentally sensitive areas when the state can carry out its intended development on the mainland of Penang, in Seberang Perai, if indeed this is necessary.

The issue is not an 'either or' dilemma, i.e. development versus the preservation of environmentally sensitive areas. We can have both if only the state is willing to consider alternative opportunities on the mainland.

Zairil refers to his fear of Penangites wanting "to leave for greener pastures elsewhere" if not for the project. That need not be the case, if the Penang state government is serious about the creation of genuinely sustainable jobs, including in Seberang Perai, without sacrificing what is green in the state.

In fact, given the pandemic and the impact it has had on the economy and jobs, there is much anecdotal evidence that many in this country, especially in the lower income category are returning to the sea and to land to fish or farm, to feed their families and to also earn a living.

Surely we must preserve our rich biodiversity resources that exist in our oceans more than ever, instead of sacrificing them for some illusory gain in the future!

What we fear most is that given the state government's current plans and trajectory, there will be nothing green left in Penang, as we will lose our precious ecosystems.

It is World Environment Day on June 5 and World Oceans Day on June 8.

For the sake of our environment and oceans, we reiterate our support for Nurul Izzah's call for the massive reclamation project to be cancelled in view of the immediate pressing needs of the COVID-19 pandemic, and in an effort to preserve Penang's valuable fishing grounds, the livelihood of fishermen and overall food security of the nation.

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