

Train focus on consultation

STRAIGHT from the heart

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THE six-month old quandary confronting the 23 owners of the century-old buildings along Jalan Sultan, Kuala Lumpur remains unresolved with none of them signing up the common agreement drawn up by MRT Co by the Feb 29 deadline.

In other words, they had all breached the deadline set by this newly constituted government-linked company (GLC) which had earlier threatened to have their properties acquired mandatorily.

In the protracted tussle, numerous exchanges had taken place. However, the affected property owners who are supportive of the call for re-routing of the proposed MRT line were not given a single opportunity to have their voices heard by MRT Co. The line is set to cut across the heart of Jalan Sultan (popularly known as Chinatown), right underneath the affected shop-houses that have been standing there since the 1920s

and 30s.

Instead, the owners were put under the pressure cooker from both the Public Land Transport Commission (SPAD) and MRT Co with deadlines for submission of property valuation reports despite numerous assurances through the media that no forced acquisition will be imposed.

Quietly behind the scenes, most property owners had been approached for a non-confrontational settlement but no guarantee had ever been made in relation to the return of ownership of their property upon completion of tunneling works beneath their buildings.

The property owners are also saddled with possible structural damage caused to the pre-war buildings.

All the misgivings raised have hitherto remained open-ended with no clear solution in sight. Twenty affected property owners were once said to have been cowed into accepting the terms and conditions dictated by MRT Co turned out to be mere hulla-baloo when the deadline was breached.

The root of controversy lies not in the perceived rejection of providing MRT services in the tourist area of Jalan Sultan and its vicinity (including Jalan Petaling). Instead, it boils down to the ill-handling of the issue when the proposed MRT line was being hatched. Ostensibly, insufficient engagement or no prior consultation with the affected local community had sparked the row.

The stakeholders were said to have been caught off-guard. No Social Impact Assessment was known to have ever been conducted in the community despite MRT Co's claims otherwise.

While responding positively to the introduction of an MRT service in Klang Valley in its bid to alleviate the heightening traffic congestion, the disgruntlement of the affected 23 property owners and their call for re-routing so as to spare their inherited properties might be understandable and worth ample public empathy. But to the community at large, irrespective of ethnicity and creed, they have a larger picture in mind as the century-old buildings consti-

tuted part of the founding history of Kuala Lumpur where collective memory of the evolutionary changes in the township is widely viewed invaluable and not to be sacrificed for the sake of physical development.

The proposal for re-routing spearheaded by the Selangor Chinese Assembly Hall (SCAH) has explored the possibility of sparing the earmarked buildings in both Jalan Sultan and the commercial hub of Jalan Bukit Bintang by reactivating the long abandoned rail track along Jalan Cheng Lock (formerly known as Foch Avenue) and Jalan Pudu, thus averting any negative impact on existing buildings and businesses in the heart of the city.

Unfortunately the proposal had never been granted any chance of a hearing since the beginning as the so-called experts' proposal is deemed final. This is truly inconsistent with the prime minister's call for discarding the "government knows best" mindset.

At this juncture as the pre-electoral fever is intensifying, partisans may in one way or other link the issue to election, but the core issues at

hand should in no way be eclipsed by such electoral contemplation. What the Malaysian community at large aspire is not just an interim reprieve or any kind of political expediency, but rather an amicable and convincing solution that could facilitate the implementation of the MRT project without erasing the century-old heritage off the map of our capital city.

Perhaps what we can learn from this incident is more embracing engagement and prior consultation with the stakeholders. Sufficient latitude for accommodating alternative views must be in place so as to make the consultation meaningful as opposed to just a monologue from the authorities. Any ambiguity in addressing public misgivings would certainly give rise to more doubts than resolving the prevailing woes at hand.

As it is, any form of forced acquisition is deemed non-viable as several unresolved apprehension brought to the fore by the community in the name of preserving heritage buildings still remain unanswered. These include:

(i) The viability of MRT line re-routing. A rational and intellectual discourse on the subject matter is very much anticipated;

(ii) The structural safety of the properties in question while tunneling is done has to be ascertained with sufficient engineering study and not by mere verbal assurance without any technical recourse, if at all the re-routing were deemed non-viable;

(iii) As in the case stated in (ii), the property ownership upon completion of the project must clearly be indicated and not be left open-ended.

Indeed, the present gridlock needs to be broken with full sincerity and maturity from all quarters. No arm-twisting, intimidating or sword-crossing in media would ever be able to remove the hurdles ahead. Ultimately, common sense perhaps laced with a sense of history and engineering must be allowed to prevail before problems at hand could ever be resolved.

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