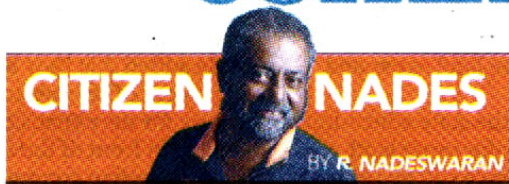


The cost of community comfort



EVERYONE wants a roof over his or her head, live comfortably, move around without hassle and above all, enjoy life. That's what everyone expects, but there comes a time when individuals have to make sacrifices for the benefit of the majority, especially the community in which he or she lives in.

In 1994, a row of 16 single-storey terrace houses had to make way for what is now the Taman Bahagia LRT station in Petaling Jaya. When the residents then came to see me, the explanation given to them was that compulsory acquisition is permissible under the law for a public purpose and that small sacrifices had to be made for the larger interests of the rest of the community.

My views have not changed. Even if our property has not been acquired, we have to endure endless traffic jams, noise and dust pollution when a public amenity is being constructed. These days, with technology, such inconveniences can be brought down to a minimal level.

I had then argued and will continue to hold the view that if every resident in London or Frankfurt would have objected on such grounds, then the Underground and the U-Bahn respectively will not be in operation.

Therefore, when the residents of Pinggir Zaaba in Taman Tun Dr Ismail, Kuala

Lumpur last week expressed dissatisfaction over the construction of the Mass Rapid Transit (MRT) station in their neighbourhood, there was some apprehension over their perceived opposition.

After speaking to residents who are affected by the construction, their opposition is on the premise that they had been misled into believing that their houses would be acquired and if not, they would be compensated for insulating their houses against noise and dust pollution.

During several meetings with us, says a resident, we were given the impression that the developer, MRT Corporation, would make adequate reimbursement for whatever costs involved in carrying out our lives, or buy over our houses.

It did come as a surprise when the Special Compensation Committee (SCC) rejected the acquisition on the basis that there is no legal requirement to do so as the houses were not affected by the construction of the station.

The residents made it clear that they are not objecting to the station itself but the manner in which they had been treated. After 11 meetings, several hours of protracted discussions and promises, they find themselves in a no-win situation. They are of the opinion that MRT Corp had wasted their time and if there was no need for acquisition in the first place, then the discussions should have been centred on other matters that affect their daily lives.

So, herein lay the pertinent questions: If the SCC had deemed it fit that no acquisition

is necessary, why then did MRT Corp enter into negotiations with owners of 66 units, and then another round of talks with 41 whose houses were deemed to be "affected by construction"? Why did MRT Corp continue to give false hopes to the residents when from the outset, it did not have the mandate to do so without the nod from the SCC?

The feelings of the residents are understandable and it would be wrong to presume that the high and mighty living in posh areas are against public transport for the masses. On the contrary, the residents see no reason to object to a scheme which they too will benefit, but it is comprehensible that they are up in arms over the manner in which this whole episode has proceeded.

Had there been no promises of acquisition or compensation that comes with such an exercise, there would be no reason to complain. While MRT Corp has made the effort in wanting to engage with stakeholders, it must exercise care that it can live up to the promises it makes.

If such undertakings cannot be fulfilled, they should not have been made. In the case of the Pinggir Zaaba residents, they have resorted to legal action and this is going to be costly and time consuming. It is hoped that both parties can sit again and come to a middle-of-the-road decision which will be beneficial to all concerned.

R. Nadeswaran is editor (special and investigative reporting) at theSun and can be reached at: citizen-nades@thesundaily.com