

Orderly development lacking in Sabah

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Kota Kinabalu: Sabah needs a proper master plan for orderly development in every district, according to chartered property surveyor and consultant Sr Raja Sundra Lingam @ Sunny Kelvin.

He said the pace of development in Sabah is slower than in Peninsula which has a higher population density.

“Without a proper master plan, building type zoning can change, as many cases in the past.

“Contractors working on utilities can dig here and there, one after another for different pipe or cable laying, etc,” he said and called for identifying a utility corridor reserve to accommodate these works.

Sr Raja was speaking in a NGO Sabar – Kopitiam Council “Sabah Voices to Action” podcast hosted by talk show stars Adi and Haffisz on “Sabah’s infrastructure and Housing Challenges: No end in sight. What is holding back progress?”

“Planning is a very important aspect of development,” Sr Raja said. “What Sabah lacks is excellence on the implementation stage.

“We have all the good framework ingredients to develop the state in a good way.”

Ir. Lo Chong Chiun concurred with Sr Raja that with the British system of town planning and standards, Sabah has got a “good framework”.

However, he noted that based on media news reports, “we are really in a bad state or conditions, where roads, electricity supply, etc, are in a mess.”

One of the key reasons, according to Ir. Lo, was “different departments or agencies working in silos.

“They are not sharing information. You are doing your thing, and I am doing my thing.

“It is all not coordinated. Unfortunately, even the district councils probably don’t talk to each other.” he said.

Sr Raja noted that property prices in and around the state capital have gone up by a huge margin within 60 years of Sabah history in Malaysia, making it expensive and beyond the search of many to own homes nearer to their places of work.

“Most Sabahans can’t afford the houses.” How did property prices become so expensive?

Sr Raja attributed it to the scarcity of suitable flat land as the topography of the city has hills such as the Signal Hill and the Shangri-La heights (next to the KKIA) that limit development potential.

“Our cities are mostly coastal cities,” he said, adding that housing is a basic necessity for every Sabahan. “Everybody should own a house.”

He also blamed inflation costs, the need to import building materials and that due to the Cabotage Policy making shippers unloading these building materials in Port Klang and the need to re-ship these items by local ships to Sabah’s main port and feeder ports.

The bad road infrastructure to transport building materials also add to the rising costs of construction and labour.

Without a good public transportation system, car ownership is a must for the working population to get to work and return home.

This led to traffic congestion as the working population increases every year putting more vehicles on the road while road network expansion is slow to accommodate heavy traffic flow during peak hours.

Sr Raja Sundra Lingam @ Sunny Kelvin shared his Tuaran resident staff’s working life experience coming to work in the morning: “To reach my office here in Kota Kinabalu, they have to leave their Tuaran homes by 5:30 a.m.”

“What we do need is LRT,” he said.

Ir. Lo said, “We actually do not have any public transportation. What we have is the minibus which is giving us a lot of problems.”

Sr Raja promotes ‘Transit Oriented Development’ TOD) which is a universal land-use solution that encourages mixed-use developments around public transit systems.

Specifically, clustering housing, jobs, schools, commercial spaces, health services, and amenities within close distance of a transit station.

However, this is not seen in Sabah, where in the state capital, even the planned bus depots except for Inanam and KK Sentral were not yet built in Penampang, Kepyayan next to KKIA, etc. TOD placemaking also focuses on creating quality pedestrian-centric environments.

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"Sabah Voices to Action - Shaping Sabah's Future Together" is a citizen-driven, non-partisan initiative running from March to June 2025, dedicated to amplifying Sabahans' voices, fostering meaningful discussions, and shaping policies on education, healthcare, public infrastructure, and good governance.

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Together, we can build a stronger, more inclusive Sabah!

