

Creating a Kuala Lumpur we want to work and live in

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Hari Raya Aidilfitri is just around the corner and as usual, there will be an exodus from Kuala Lumpur. Muslims will *balik kampung* to visit loved ones and friends in their hometowns and villages. Other Malaysians will take their holidays too. The pre-Raya traffic jams caused by pasar Ramadan will come to an end and newspapers will soon print pictures of empty streets.

Folks, enjoy the scene because it will not last much longer. Soon the kampung will be busy like KL and other cities. This is because the children who left their kampung to work in KL will soon be the heads of their families and their own children will come to pay their respects during Raya in the city. Then the pre-Raya traffic jams in KL will be replaced by equally noxious Raya jams as they pay visit Mak Long and Mak Chu — from suburb to suburb and not from the city to the kampung.

The statistics support this scenario. The ratio of rural to urban population in Malaysia has changed dramatically. In 1960, the urban population in Malaysia was 25% of the total. It increased rapidly to 65% in 2005 and reached 72% in 2010. It is expected to reach 80% by 2015 because the rate of urbanisation is 2.4% per annum.

This trend is not peculiar to Malaysia. Cities now deliver 70% of global gross domestic product and recently, the World Bank altered its approach to urbanisation. It is now looking for ways not to contain urbanisation, but to embrace and prepare for it and to reap the benefits of economic growth associated with urbanisation while protecting the urbanites' quality of life.

Cities hold both the promise of economic opportunities and social mobility yet at the same time are hosts to massive poverty and social exclusion. In view of this, there are calls for reinventing the future through better urbanisation (*Designing Urban 3.0*).

Since the majority of us live in urban areas, it is time we took a deeper interest.

Liveable cities should be built around these pillars: economic vibrancy, good and affordable housing, energy efficiency, good education and skills training, healthcare, well-organised and efficient public transport, environmentally

sustainable, culturally rich and high degree of personal safety.

A good city does not mean an expensive one: costs for urban residents and businesses should not be exorbitant. A city is not just a place to work but to have leisure, to seek knowledge and to nurture families. By developing a positive and sustainable mode of city living, we will be able to sustain a social life.

There are many surveys that measure and compare one city with another. For example, the Quality of Living Survey organised by Mercer follows 39 factors that are grouped into 10 categories — political and social environment; economic environment; socio-cultural environment; health and sanitation; schools and education; public services and transport; recreation; housing; consumer goods; and natural environment.

According to the most recent Mercer survey, the top cities are Vienna, Zurich, Auckland and Munich while Kuala Lumpur is No 76. This survey was carried out from September to November 2011. Future surveys will include a new category — personal safety, which includes internal stability, crime and law enforcement to reflect the concerns of rising threats to security.

The government is ahead in recognising the economic importance of cities. The Economic Transformation Programme lists the development of Greater Kuala Lumpur/Klang Valley as one of the 12 National Key Economic Areas (NKEA) to catalyse national growth and job creation. To do so, the government envisages attracting dynamic firms to set up shop in priority sectors, attract talent, build urban public transport, establish pedestrian walks, and create iconic places and attractions.

However, it is important to bear in mind that urbanisation is not only about economic growth. Cities will need to be equipped to accommodate the demands of new residents, and meet the needs of present dwellers while improving the quality of life for all. This will re-



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BY MAHANI ZAINAL ABIDIN

quire proactive measures to cope with rising demand pressures on housing, transport, education, health and other services. These services can be provided but the recurring question is, who will bear the cost?

In the rural areas, the government has long provided a wide range of services, such as schools, health clinics, roads and agricultural support with little charge to users. In urban areas, the higher income groups mostly buy these services from the private sector and pay market prices. Unfortunately, the lower income group in urban areas cannot afford to pay market prices and rely on the government to provide clinics, schools and much more.

It is not surprising that the issue of the rising cost of living is a priority and the cause of much unhappiness. City dwellers have to pay for most things and it will be challenging for the lower income groups to find affordable living. Crammed housing, lack of recreational space and affordable educational opportunities can lead to social problems.

To overcome these issues, social safety net programmes for the urban poor should be introduced. These include targeted subsidy support to mitigate sharply rising prices, housing facilities for the lower income group and skills training programmes for the youth.

There is a strong case to make that the government should provide public goods and encourage the private sector to generously commit and fulfil its corporate social responsibility. Another important element is the promotion of a safe and sustainable urban environment. It is estimated that 70% of greenhouse gas emissions come from cities and more than 70% of energy is consumed in urban areas. Managing environmental issues in cities can dictate how we will cope with climate change and the quality of life that we will have in the future.

The fight to make Bukit Kiara a permanent forest reserve in the heart of KL exemplifies one of the key issues in urbanisation — that

of preserving the city's green lung versus maximising the commercial value of land. As land prices in cities skyrocket, it is very tempting for municipalities to develop such green lungs in commercial centres.

However, better councils generally prevail, and indeed in many cities, the public parks are sacrosanct and cannot be touched. Well-known examples are Central Park in New York, Hyde Park in London and the Imperial Palace and its grounds in Tokyo.

The former Taman Tasik Perdana in Kuala Lumpur was recently renamed Taman Botani Perdana. It is clearly recognised as a green lung with its many trees and plants helping our air quality. It is also a place where families can enjoy some time outside, joggers can work on their Olympic aspirations and tourists can admire our lush tropical plants. Other major cities in Malaysia, such as Johor Baru, should also have public parks similar to Penang's botanical garden.

Urbanisation and urban policies are important instruments for national development, prosperity and well-being. The world's most liveable cities are well planned and prosperous. They are too important to be left to the city or municipal authorities. They require national attention to critical policy areas, such as land and housing markets, infrastructure, transport, education and skills training, environmental management and socio-cultural aspects. To reduce urban poverty, cities must make pro-poor policies their top agenda.

Malaysia is ahead of many countries in terms of urban governance. The Ministry of Federal Territories and Urban Wellbeing is in charge of overseeing the administration and development of all three federal territories and to eradicate urban poverty. The ministry has been tasked with making KL one of the top 20 most liveable cities in the world and in economic growth.

I hope other cities in Malaysia will have comprehensive plans and programmes to make them a nice place to live, work and bring up families too. ■

Datuk Mahani Zainal Abidin is chief executive of the Institute of Strategic and International Studies Malaysia