

Penang ferries face uncertain future

State wants services enhanced but the new operators can't afford it

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GEORGE TOWN: Plans to enhance the Penang ferry service have stalled with no clear direction of its future and the state government is not happy about it.

Prasarana Malaysia Bhd, which took over the running of the ferry service from Penang Port Sdn Bhd (PPSB) in May, is cash-strapped and cannot give a clear indication of its plans.

"It looks like there will not be any major expansion and we can definitely rule out new catamaran ferries for now," said a former senior official of the Penang Port Commission.

Transport Minister Anthony Loke announced in early August that Prasarana would be allocated RM90mil to upgrade the ferries and terminals, with RM21mil of that to go towards buying new passenger ferries.

A total of RM13.7mil from the allocation

would be spent on repairs on six existing ferries over three years.

When this will be carried out, though, has a question mark.

PPSB was losing RM20mil a year running the ferry service and it was given to Prasarana for a token sum of RM1.

"Why would Prasarana spend millions to expand the terminal when the service is running at a loss and the RM90mil allocation is merely to sustain the existing operation?" said a former state executive councillor.

He added that while catamaran ferries will provide high speed travel, people would not be able to afford the charges, which would definitely be much higher than the present RM1.40 for pedestrians using the ferry.

Penang Rapid Ferry head Muhammad Yazurin Sallij said Rapid Ferry will follow the minister's lead.

"We will have to go with only this for now and I can't comment on what the other plans are," said Muhammad Yazurin when asked if bringing the catamarans had been in the pipeline when Prasarana took over in May.

"About 3,000 people use the ferries daily now but fewer than 1,000 vehicles. As such, only passenger ferries would be the right model as vehicles can use the two bridges."

The state government is not happy with the lack of movement here.

Chief Minister Chow Kon Yeow, at a briefing by Penang Sentral earlier this week, said the ferry service needs to be improved, and the plan to bring in the catamarans should be realised.

He said the federal government should upgrade the ferry service by introducing catamarans as soon as possible.

Chow said this when asked when the old structures of the terminal in Butterworth would be upgraded.

He also said Malaysia Resources Corporation Berhad (MRCB), the developer of Penang Sentral, was willing to step in to improve the ferry terminal.

He said since the locations of catamaran terminals were identified earlier, the state would pursue the matter at the Penang Transportation Council meeting on Aug 27.

The federal government, said Chow, should coordinate how MRCB and Prasarana could work together to expand and upgrade the ferry terminal.

The Penang ferry service is almost 100 years old. It began in the 1920s and was first called Railway Ferries, using rail steamboats.

The Sultan Abdul Halim Terminal in Butterworth was built in 1956.

There hasn't been any major expansion or upgrade since then, beyond minor upgrading works.