

Catamarans may replace Penang ferries

> Ageing fleet in need of change to counter worsening congestion

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GEORGE TOWN: Penang may witness a revolutionary change in its public transport mode soon with a proposal by Rapid Ferry Sdn Bhd to replace the ageing fleet of cross-channel ferries with modern twin-hull high-speed catamarans and the possibility of providing dedicated lanes for the Rapid Penang stage buses to ply certain areas of the state.

The move is part of an agenda to drive forward an efficient public transport system to counter the worsening congestion, said Chief Minister Chow Kon Yeow.

Speaking in an interview, Chow confirmed that he had received a proposal from Rapid Ferry Sdn Bhd officers, to substitute the ferries with catamarans during a courtesy call recently.

Some of the ferries can be retained to carry passengers or to offer cruises for tourism whereas the catamarans can be deployed strictly to ferry automobiles.

Chow said that the state was supportive of any measure to alleviate traffic congestion.

An efficient ferry service can complement the existing two cross-channel bridges that connect George Town and Bayan Lepas on the island to Seberang Jaya and Batu Kawan on the mainland respectively.

The ferry, which is the third connector, links Weld Quay with Butterworth on the mainland.

Elaborating on the present measures to address the congestion before approval and construction can begin on the RM46 billion Penang Transport Masterplan, Chow said that the catamarans and bus lanes are meant

to alleviate the congestion now.

"The only viable solution is an efficient public transport system, which can only come in time through the masterplan," he said.

Rapid Ferry division head Muhammad Yazurin Sallij Muhammad Yasin, when contacted, said the proposal was not confirmed due to a change in government.

"We need feedback from the new government on this matter so it remains a proposal. Ours is different from the model mooted by the Penang Port before we took over. But it is premature to disclose anything."

The ferry operates like a shuttle service within the Penang Channel from 6am until midnight with a frequency of every 30 minutes depending on the load.

There are presently six ferries in the fleet and the present models were first introduced into service in the 1970s.

Penang Port's acting chief executive officer Sasedharan Vasudevan said that the proposal can be supported, as the ferry service needs to be innovated to bring back efficiency and eventually profitability to its operations.

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