

Star Metro

THE STAR, WEDNESDAY 27 DECEMBER 2023

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Triumphs and challenges



New ferries, upcoming hill cable car, LRT and a host of infrastructure developments give Penangites much to rejoice. But a tragedy cast a pall on 2023 when a construction site collapse claimed several lives. >2&3

PENANG

Monumental year to remember

State initiatives and projects expected to boost economy, tourism, quality of life in Penang

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YEARENDER
2024

MANY in Malaysia would agree that things finally felt normal this year after the Covid-19 pandemic.

With travel back in vogue, events flourishing, retail spending booming and the industrial sector attracting high investments, the overall feeling is positive.

People in Penang had extra reason to feel upbeat as the state announced or kickstarted several major infrastructure development projects as part of the Penang Unity Manifesto 2023.

These are hoped to improve the quality of life for locals, spur economic growth and elevate both the state's tourism and investment appeal in the eyes of the world.

Here are the major events of the year that made the headlines.

Penang Hill cable car

Journeys up and down the island's "Great Hill" will come with bird's eye view once the eagerly anticipated cable car system becomes operational in a few years' time.

A lower station will be built near the Penang Botanic Gardens, from which 43 gondolas would ply a scenic route above lush tropical rainforests.

These will carry 1,000 passen-

gers per hour and complement the century-old funicular railway in Ayer Itam.

Penang Hill Corporation (PHC) general manager Datuk Cheok Lay Leng said environmental, traffic and social impact assessments, along with geotechnical studies, were being finalised to ensure compliance with requirements set by the respective authorities.

He said the alignment and number of towers were also close to being finalised.

The planned line, near the existing Jeep track, means no new roads need to be opened.

Most of the towers would be located near the lower and upper stations.

Foundations will be constructed using the hand-dug caisson method, eliminating the need for excessive clearing or heavy machinery. All these measures will significantly minimise environmental impact.

"With Penang Hill and its surrounding areas recognised as a Unesco biosphere reserve, we were cognisant of the need to preserve the natural landscape and maintain ecological balance."

"The hill's natural and historical heritage is priceless to Penang. Trees will be replanted



An artist's impression of the upcoming Silicon Island. (Right) Silicon Island reclamation works ongoing as of last month. — Photos: KT GOH, ZHAFARAN NASIB and CHAN BOON KAI/The Star

at the few affected sites where feasible.

"We'll ensure the project is executed in accordance with stringent technical, safety and environmental standards," Cheok told *StarMetro*.

He added that physical works

were expected to commence in the second quarter of 2024, with completion expected in 18 to 24 months.

Silicon Island

This 930ha man-made island off Penang island's southern coast is poised to be the state's economic catalyst and tourism jewel for decades to come.

With a Green Tech Park (GTP) and the Heart of the Island (HotI) business district as its main components, it is expected to generate significant economic impact through some 220,000 direct, indirect and induced jobs across multiple sectors by 2050.

Reclamation works started on Sept 1. This will be completed in phases over the next 15 years. The first phase, involving 510ha, should be done by 2027.

Construction of common infrastructure is slated to begin in the second half of 2024, while the first piece of industrial land is expected to be handed over sometime in 2025.

The 283ha GTP will redefine the landscape of industrial parks with its forward-thinking approach to environmental responsibility.

Not only would the site be enveloped in greenery, its first

phase will also be fully powered by renewable energies and set new standards for sustainability.

GTP's cutting-edge digital infrastructure as well as Penang's well-established standing as a crucial, global electronics-and-electrical hub, ideally positions it to attract a wide array of high-value sectors.

The strategic goal is to advance high-value technology components, with research, design and development, high-tech manufacturing, advanced packaging, automation, robotics, artificial intelligence (AI) and the Internet of Things (IoT) being key focus areas.

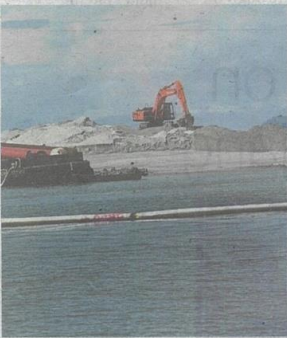
Situated close to GTP will be the Global Business Services (GBS) Software Campus, a hub of essential industry facilities such as Centres of Excellence (CoEs), innovation and R&D suites, educational institutions, training facilities and incubator labs – to facilitate collaborations and cross-pollination of ideas to drive innovation.

HotI is envisioned as a world-class tourist destination that seamlessly integrates leisure, commerce and community, complementing the existing George Town heritage zone.



The Penang Hill cable car will complement the existing funicular railway that has been in operation for a century.

The 'Teluk Kumbar', one of the four new ferries that began service in August, plying the route between George Town and Butterworth. In the background are the old double-decker ferries.



With a multi-faceted hub comprising a retail precinct with trendy spaces, business district and future-ready office facilities, Hoti will offer visitors an experience of culture and entertainment.

Ayer Itam-Tun Dr Lim Chong Eu Expressway Bypass

Also known as Package Two, the RM851mil bypass is one of three toll-free road projects included under the RM6.3bil Penang Undersea Tunnel project.

To serve as an alternative route between the central, northern and southern parts of Penang island, it is expected to alleviate daily congestion and significantly reduce travel time.

Long-term benefits would be felt by the 300,000-plus population living or working within the vast Ayer Itam and Paya Terubong townships.

The 5.7km bypass will stretch 1.8km at ground level, with the remaining parts elevated using viaduct structures, tunnels or grade sections.

There will be three interchanges – at Lebuhraya Thean Teik-Jalan Thean Teik; the Jalan Bukit Gambir-Jalan Sultan Azlan Shah junction, and the threshold of the Tun Dr Lim Chong Eu Expressway.

These use "left in, left out"



A Fire and Rescue Department officer showing the beam that collapsed in Batu Maung.



Work on the Ayer Itam-Tun Dr Lim Chong Eu Expressway bypass is underway.

access points and elevated U-turns. The bypass is slated for completion by mid-2025 and is currently halfway complete.

The other two road projects are the North Coastal Paired Road (Package One) linking Tanjung Bungah and Teluk Bahang, and Gurney Drive-Tun Dr Lim Chong Eu Expressway Bypass (Package Three).

New ferries

A new era in Penang's long-standing, cross-channel ferry service dawned in August with the arrival of four new, fast vessels.

Named *Teluk Bahang*, *Teluk Duyung*, *Teluk Kampi* and *Teluk Kumbar*, they each cost RM18mil and are capable of traversing the channel in just 10 minutes.

Each accommodates 150 passengers in a comfortable air-conditioned cabin while an additional 50 motorcycles or bicycles can be ferried on a partially open deck.

These replaced the old passenger-and-vehicle ferries which had been in use since the mid-1970s and phased out at the end of 2020.

The service runs from 6.30am to 9.30pm daily, with 68 trips made daily at a frequency of 20 minutes during peak hours.

Three ferries are in daily operation, with the fourth on standby.

The arrival of the new ferries also saw major upgrades done to both the Raja Tun Uda Terminal in George Town and Sultan Abdul Halim Terminal in Butterworth.

They are now air-conditioned and comfortable, with WiFi, phone-charging docks and facilities for the disabled.

Earlier this month, a new Penang Bridge Sunset Cruise was also introduced in collaboration with a restaurant operator.

The cruise every Saturday and Sunday evening (5pm to 8pm) uses the spare ferry and departs from the George Town terminal.

Priced at RM148 for adults and RM68 for children, the cruise includes a buffet dinner on board.

Penang Light Rail Transit

The Federal Government has committed to provide funding for the Penang Light Rail Transit (LRT) project which will be undertaken by project manager Mass Rapid Transit Corp Sdn Bhd (MRT Corp).

It was announced that there will also be a major enhancement in the much-anticipated project's first phase.

Instead of just stretching from Bayan Lepas to Komtar, the LRT line will go all the way to Tanjung Bungah, covering a 29km distance with 27 stations.

Last month, state infrastructure, transport and digital development committee chairman Zairil Khir Johari had said MRT Corp had called for tender to appoint a research consultant for the project.

The state, he said, had handed over various technical, feasibility and alignment studies on the LRT project to MRT Corp, adding that the costs, implementation and start date of the project would be decided by the Transport Ministry.

In May, Prime Minister Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim announced that the Federal Government would set aside an allocation for Penang to have its first LRT.



Voters casting their ballots at Ayer Itam on GE15 polling day.

Penang state election

Pakatan Harapan was returned for a fourth term to rule Penang with its new found ally – Barisan Nasional – albeit with a less impressive victory this time around.

The coalition won 29 of the 40 seats in the state, with its main rival Perikatan Nasional making inroads by winning 11 seats.

Since 2008, Pakatan (previously known as Pakatan Rakyat) has been in total control, sweeping to victory in 29 seats (2008), 30 (2013) and 37 (2018).

But in the 15th state election, Pakatan had expected a tough time judging by how the "green wave" had swept through Penang in the 15th General Election last year.

In that election, PKR vice-president Nurul Izzah Anwar lost in her family's stronghold of Permatang Pauh.

The parliamentary seat had been held by her family since 1982, having been won by her father, her mother and herself.

Also falling by the wayside then was Barisan's incumbent Kepala Batas MP Dato' Seri Reezal Merican Naina Merican.

Just days before polling day on Aug 12, Chief Minister Chow Kon Yeow, who was returned for his second and final term as chief executive, predicted Pakatan could win 30 seats. It won 29 seats.

While DAP managed to keep its 100% record of winning all 19 seats it contested since 2008, PKR ended up the biggest loser, undoing its 100% winning record in the 2018 state polls.

This time, it won seven out of the 13 seats contested. Umno and Amanah won two and one seat respectively.

On the Perikatan front, PAS emerged the biggest winner with seven seats in the bag.

Its partner Bersatu fared well, too, by securing four seats.

The ratio of 29:11 between Pakatan-Barisan and Perikatan replicates the state assembly composition in 2008.

Then, it was 29 Pakatan Rakyat assemblymen against 11 Umno assemblymen.

Interestingly, Umno is again in the Penang government after a 15-year hiatus.

Construction mishap

The earth shook with a loud rumble.

Witnesses said large concrete beams, along with thousands of rods from scaffolding supports in the mid section of a warehouse, under construction, collapsed, bringing down with them several workers and burying them underneath.

Initially, nine Bangladeshi workers were said to be working at the site in Batu Maung last month.

A search-and-rescue operation was immediately activated.

Three of the workers – Md Ahd Ali, 42, Mohamad Mokaddes Ali, 46, and Mohammad Sayful Islam, 29 – were killed.

Two others, Md Uzzal Mridha, 30, and Md Razu Ahamed, 33, were seriously injured.

Another four who were initially thought to be pinned under the rubble, managed to escape.

An immediate stop-work order was issued, with the Department of Occupational Safety and Health and a team from the Forensic Engineering Division launching an investigation at the site.