News from the Southern Corridor

by ***Suvarna Ooi***

LOCATED in the southern state of Johor, Iskandar Malaysia is set to be one of the largest development projects in the region. At 2217 km^2, it is three times the size of neighbouring Singapore. This is a long term project with a 25-year vision to create a strong and sustainable global metropolis by the year 2025.

Puan Arlida Ariff, CEO and President of Iskandar Investment Bhd (IIB), is leading the development within the country's foremost emerging economic zone. As the catalytic developer of Iskandar Malaysia, IIB drives long-term catalytic projects into the region. Puan Arlida, who spearheaded the launch of key projects such as the PETRONAS Twin Towers and Menara Maxis, explained that the Iskandar Regional Development Authority (IRDA) is the regulatory authority mandated to plan, promote and facilitate the development of Iskandar Malaysia while IIB is IRDA's long-term partner, tasked with driving projects into the region.

Iskandar Malaysia focuses on nine main pillars which will serve as the main drivers to achieving the objectives of Iskandar Malaysia, which include Electrical and Electronics, Petroleum and Oleochemicals, Food and Agro Processing, Logistics Services, Leisure and Tourism, Health Services, Financial Services, Educational Services and Creative Industries. As the catalytic developer in Iskandar Malaysia, IIB adds value by establishing "catalytic projects", which is set to generate economic activities in the region.

1Medini is the first residential development in Medini Iskandar Malaysia

Among the more notable developments undertaken by IIB include Medini Iskandar Malaysia, the region's flagship development and the largest urban development to date in Malaysia. Medini is located within the Nusajaya development zone, one of the five Flagship Zones within Iskandar Malaysia. Medini will be a mixed-use urban development that will be home to LEGOLAND Malaysia, the first LEGOLAND theme park in Asia, as well as the Iskandar Financial District, which aims to be a world-class hub for Islamic finance in Southeast Asia.

Other projects spearheaded by IIB are the coastal highway between Nusajaya and Johor Baru, Marlborough College Malaysia and Newcastle Medicine Malaysia (NUMed) in EduCity. These will complement the other upcoming developments in the region, including manufacturing projects in Tanjung Langsat, as well as the Puteri Harbour Lifestyle Retail and family entertainment centre.

Ir. Sim Tian Liang, Chairman of IEM Southern Branch, observed that the government is making a serious effort in developing the region into a modern metropolitan city. This is evident through the rapid physical infrastructure development that is currently taking place. He said, "All these developments, if properly developed and maintained, are good for the engineers and the people at large. What we need now are the right policies, environment and human capital for further follow through after the physical development. Most importantly, we need economic activities and the migration of people to this region to make it vibrant."

As with all major development, Iskandar Malaysia is not without its challenges. Puan Arlida, who holds a Master of Engineering degree from the University of California, believes that some of the challenges that the local engineering fraternity should look out for include the upgrading of skills to keep up with the latest technological innovations, particularly in the area of green technology.

Puan Arlida Ariff, CEO and President of Iskandar Investment Bhd (IIB)

Ir. Sim concurs, adding that some of the development projects at Iskandar Malaysia may prove to be a challenge to local engineers and engineering firms due to the adoption of new green or eco technology, biotechnology and modern high-rise building technology. To overcome the issue, he urged local engineering firms to form strategic alliances or joint ventures with suitable partners.

On the other hand, Ir. Ling Ngie Soon, Vice-Chairman of IEM Southern Branch, believes that one of the biggest challenges that engineers in the state are facing is the fact that the majority of the engineering contracts for Iskandar Malaysia were awarded to Kuala Lumpur-based firms. In addition, he added that the involvement of Johor-based engineering firms is mostly confined to paperwork.

According to Puan Arlida, the development at Iskandar Malaysia is meant to benefit the local community including the engineering fraternity. She said, "New investors into Iskandar Malaysia, whether local or foreign, have already been expressing the need for talent, particularly local engineers."

In that case, Ir. Ling responded that the IEM Southern Branch can play an important role in bridging the gap between local engineering firms and the Iskandar Regional Development Authority (IRDA).

UTM's Strategic Role in Iskandar Malaysia

AS the Vice-Chancellor of Universiti Teknologi Malaysia (UTM), a prominent public university in the southern region, Dato' Ir. Prof. Dr Zaini bin Ujang pointed out that UTM has been entrusted by the Iskandar Regional Development Authority (IRDA) to play a significant role in coordinating and undertaking programmes and activities related to the development of Iskandar Malaysia. This leads to the setting up of the Iskandar Malaysia Universiti Teknologi Malaysia Research Centre (IMREC).

According to him, one of the most significant milestones for IMREC is the Iskandar Malaysia Graduate Leadership Assessment and Development (IMGLAD) Programme. IMGLAD is a collaboration between IMREC and Deloitte Consulting Malaysia to develop a graduate leadership programme in order to build a sustainable leadership pipeline in Iskandar Malaysia.

Dato' Ir. Prof. Dr Zaini said, "With the implementation of IMGLAD as part of IRDA's Human Capital Development strategies, employability skills will improve among Malaysia graduates who lack soft skills. This programme is delivered by UTM experts where training is delivered through experiential learning in the form of practical exercises, role-play and simulations that mimic employment and workplace environment."

Another initiative by IMREC is the Industrialized Building System (IBS) which is designed for local contractors who wish to engage in projects within Iskandar region. IBS is a controlled construction process that utilises techniques, products, components or building systems which involve prefabricated components and on-site installation with minimum use of unskilled labours.

According to Dato' Ir. Prof. Dr Zaini, UTM is also playing a key role in the EduCity, which is envisioned as "A Community of Best Practices in Academia", adopting the best-of-breed approach in bringing world-class education to Malaysia. He explained that it aims to be an academic hub comprising the whole ecology of education; encompassing pre-school, primary, lower secondary, upper secondary, pre-university and tertiary education with a view towards bringing world-class education to Malaysia.

He said, "UTM is positioning itself as a fully integrated knowledge-based hub comprising industry centric R&D cluster to support the initiatives by Iskandar Malaysia. To achieve this, IMREC is proposing the sharing of facilities, joint programmes and research between institutions in The EduCity with UTM."

Apart from training and education programmes, IMREC is also actively involved in research and development programmes to further improve the Iskandar region. For example, IMREC is working with Geo Sense Sdn Bhd to introduce new uses for Unmanned Aerial Vehicle (UAV) technology in Johor. This project is funded by the Ministry of Science, Technology and Innovation (MOSTI) for development of high resolution aerial images of selected areas under the Malaysia Economy Development Corridor.

Dato' Ir. Prof. Dr Zaini pointed out that the high-resolution images taken through UAVs would be useful in the survey of land earmarked for development or to determine the type of development that can take place in the Iskandar region. A good example is the Satellite Map Directory for Iskandar Malaysia which represents the region by providing road and point of interest (POI) information based on images from UAVs. The process to produce the directory took almost six months to complete starting from August 2009 until February 2010 with a total cost of RM239,000.

Dato' Ir. Prof. Dr Zaini bin Ujang

In addition, research workshops for Iskandar Malaysia organised by IMREC, Unit Perancang Ekonomi Negeri Johor (UPEN Johor) and IRDA will brainstorm more than 40 proposals and suggest recommendations to the stakeholders of Iskandar Malaysia. In the pipeline is the River Management Research Centre, Eco Tourism Research and Training Centre, Integrated and Intelligent Security System, etc.

IMREC is also involved in organising seminars together with The Chinese Research Institute of Construction Management (CRIOCM). Dato' Ir. Prof. Dr Zaini explained that CRIOCM research symposium has become a well known and influential research forum in the field of construction management and real estate. Such events have been providing an important platform for academicians and professionals to exchange research findings and practical experiences.

The upcoming CRIOCM 2010 will be deliberating on a range of themes in different focus areas including Sustainable Development, Real Estate Industry, Construction Industry, Project Management, Property and Facilities Management, Emerging Issues in Contracts Management and Law, Safety and Risk Management, Information and Information Technology, Large Infrastructure Management, Professional Education for Real Estate and Construction, which will promote the development of the Iskandar region.

He said, "Engineers within the state should be encouraged to participate in the development of Iskandar Malaysia. This is possible if at least half of the contracts are awarded to qualified engineering firms within the state." Although some of the local firms are involved in projects overseas as well as those in Kuala Lumpur, he claims that, "within their own backyard, they are not given a fair chance".

In response to this, Puan Arlida gave her assurance that Iskandar Investments remains committed to providing value to the local community. She said, "We follow a fair and legal process with all of our tender agreements and partner with engineering firms who are the best in their field. So far, we have awarded three Johor based engineering firms with contracts to develop EduCity. In addition, we also support the local construction industry and have awarded 22 of our 34 contracts for 1Medini, Ninth Malaysian Plan and EduCity projects to Johor contractors."

She added that Iskandar Investment is committed to achieving development progress in the region through strong partnerships with local engineering firms to transform Iskandar Malaysia into a world-class metropolis and destination for global citizens to live, work and play.

According to Prof. Dato' Ir. Dr. Zaini bin Ujang, Vice-Chancellor of Universiti Teknologi Malaysia (UTM), Iskandar Malaysia is set to become a "strong and sustainable metropolis of international standing where living, entertainment, environment and business seamlessly converge within a bustling and vibrant metropolis".

He added that because of its strategic location and accessibility to leading Asian cities, proximity to some of the world's most rapidly growing and important economies, and a range of attractive fiscal incentives, Iskandar Malaysia is poised to attract an exciting influx of foreign and high-level corporate investments as discerning investors look to benefit from its many advantages and high growth potential. ■