

KL launches plan to revive Klang River



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KUALA LUMPUR - London has the Thames, Paris the Seine, and Singapore the Singapore River.

Kuala Lumpur, too, has the Klang River, which winds through the city centre and flows into the Strait of Malacca.

But for years, the river has been an eyesore, with some parts looking more like a dump site and a storm drain than the historical waterway it is.

It wasn't always like this.

Mr Siew Wei Hann, 58, a beef noodle seller who grew up near Petaling Street by the river in the 1960s, recalls fondly the monsoon season.

The Klang River, he told The Straits Times, would be filled to the brim. "The water was crystal clear back then and we could see lots of fish swimming with the currents. People would come with their fishing nets."

Over the years, rapid development and poor urban planning have narrowed some parts of the 120km river and, in turn, resulted in flash floods whenever the city is hit by a storm. These days, its vile stink turns people off from strolling along the footpaths that line it.

All that is about to change, at least according to the government's plan.

Kuala Lumpur City Hall is leading an ambitious effort to clean up the river, and line it with clean walkways and shady trees.

The goal is to turn the Klang River into a vibrant waterfront.

The plan is known as the "River of Life" project and is set to cost RM4 billion (S\$1.5 billion). The government is working with various agencies to improve sewerage and drainage systems, relocate squatter homes and stop

factories from dumping waste into the river.

Previous government efforts to clean the river in 1993 and 1997 came to nought. It was difficult to get different agencies - from environmental departments to municipal councils - to work together.

Things could be even tougher this time around since Selangor is now governed by the opposition Pakatan Rakyat government, while the federal government agencies come under Barisan Nasional.

Datuk Ahmad Suhaili Idrus, director of the Greater Kuala Lumpur/Klang Valley National Key Economic Area at Pemandu, the economic reform agency spearheading the project, said he is hopeful. "We have been successful thus far in working together as a team towards a common goal," he told The Straits Times.

So far, the local governments have almost completed installing wastewater treatment plants at the Selayang and Old Klang Road wet markets - identified as one of the main sources of pollution as vendors throw everything from chicken scraps to plastic bags into drains that eventually flow into the river.

The Selangor government has also recently banned development projects near the river to prevent contamination.

Mr Suhaili said some 14 river-cleaning contracts have been tendered out, and the government is in the midst of giving out 22 construction contracts to build water treatment plants and beautify stretches of the river in the city centre. Meanwhile, Kuala Lumpur City Hall is planting thousands of trees in the city centre.

Some experts point out that beautifying the river is one thing; but it does nothing to prevent flash floods.

"What the government needs to do is to widen back some stretches of the river that have become a bottleneck over the years because of development," said Professor Aminuddin Ab. Ghani, who conducts research on urban drainage and river engineering at Universiti Sains Malaysia.

Locals like Mr Chan Tuck Meng, 75, who owns a crockery shop in Jalan Tun Tan Siew Sin, less than 500m from the river, is likewise sceptical of a waterfront revival.

"Just look at the clock tower outside my shop - they spent so much money to build water fountains and pavements but what has it since become?

"A motorcycle parking lot," he said.

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