

# Penang reclamations: Then and now



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The Pengkalan Weld end of the Tun Dr Lim Chong Eu Expressway, as it is today.

RECLAMATION projects are not new in Penang. A number of heritage landmarks in George Town stand on reclaimed land.

The heritage Clan Jetties and old Malayan Railway Building (now Wisma Kastam) stand on land reclaimed for harbour trade activities in the early 19th century by the British administration.

Modern day reclamation projects on Penang island started half a century ago.

A 2017 research article on land reclamation and artificial islands in the *Global Ecology and*

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9.5sqkm in 2015.

The setting up of the Bayan Lepas Free Industrial Zone in the early 1970s led to the reclamation of the bay area north of Batu Maung on the south-east coast.



The Tun Dr Lim Chong Eu Expressway in Jelutong under construction in January 2003. To date, almost the entire east coast of Penang island has undergone reclamation.

From 1980 to 2000, almost the entire east coast of Penang island was reclaimed. Most of the coastal reclamation can be linked to the construction of the Tun Dr Lim Chong Eu (LCE) Expressway in the 1990s.

The developer that funded and built the LCE was given the right to reclaim the Jelutong coast for real estate development. It was the first highway in the country to adopt such a privatisation deal, according to a 2002 article on highway privatisations in Malaysia in the International Journal of Construction Marketing.

By 2015, the Seri Tanjung Pinang project in Tanjung Tokong brought the total reclaimed land size to 9.5sqkm. With that, Penang Island's total area grew from 290.6sqkm to 299.1sqkm.

New, ongoing and proposed reclamations such as the Seri Tanjung Pinang 2 (STP2), the state government's Penang South Islands (PSI) and the Penang Development Corporation's Linear Waterfront in Bayan Lepas, will further increase the accumulated size of reclaimed land on Penang Island to some 33sqkm.

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Datuk Seri Farizan Darus said the Penang South Islands would provide the state with new land for a new high-tech industrial park and future developments.

When they are completed in the decades to come, Penang Island's reclaimed land, including the new manmade islands, will make up about 10% of its total size.

### The need to reclaim land

Datuk Seri Chet Singh, the Penang Development Corporation's (PDC) first general manager following its founding in 1969, said Penang lacked "actual land", which had led the state government to turn to reclamation decades ago.

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“Penang island has hills in the centre. The mainland has a lot of land reserved for rice planting, which is important for food security.

“The state government has little land, and land acquisitions are costly and unpopular. People get angry (over land acquisitions),” he said.

During his time at the state development agency, he said PDC’s concept plan earmarked potential land for reclamation from George Town to the southern part of the island, and even in Seberang Prai, which is some 751sqkm in size – more than double the size of the island.



Datuk Seri Chet Singh said the state development agency already started looking at potential reclamation sites decades ago because the island lacked suitable land for future development.

“PDC needed land for industrial and urban developments like housing. When I was there, Penang reclaimed land for the Bayan Lepas free trade zone’s expansion and the LCE.

“In the 1980s, we even tried to reclaim land off the Prai coast for the Prai Industrial Area but it was not feasible.”

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“Since we could not expand in Prai, PDC moved to Batu Kawan, which is now doing very well,” said Chet, who retired in 1991.

Back then, other than the Prai cockle farmers, he said the Penang government and PDC did not face much resistance against reclamation projects in Bayan Lepas, the Macallum area in Pengkalan Weld, and along the Jelutong coastline.

“Nobody really protested. The whole stretch of the LCE Expressway was reclaimed. The reclamation redeveloped the Jelutong area.

“But the world is different from my time at PDC, with the environment becoming a huge issue,” Chet said, referring to opposition by non-governmental organisations over reclamation projects’ impact on the environment.

He said Penang should ensure PSI brought about quality development that followed world-class norms of today – addressing concerns about the environment and fishermen in the area.

### Same needs, different times

PSI is the state government’s funding model for the Penang Transport Master Plan, which includes the state’s first light rail transit (LRT) line from Komtar to the Penang International Airport.

The 930-hectare Island A – the first to be reclaimed – will house an industrial park for high-tech industries of the future. Island B (567 hectares) and Island C (323 hectares) will house business hubs and a resort island with world-class tourism attractions.

The magnitude of the reclamation has worried NGOs and environmental activists, who decry the project’s impact on the marine environment and fishermen, despite the state government’s explanations and assurances.

Penang Infrastructure Corporation chief executive officer Datuk Seri Farizan Darus, who is overseeing PSI’s implementation, said the proposed project would address the state’s need for new and safe land for future development while avoiding hill land and paddy fields.

He also said the cost to reclaim land was lower than building on hill land and acquiring land.

“There is little land without incumbrances left for development, unless you take away the paddy fields, which is not something the state government will consider.

“Acquiring paddy fields for development will mean funds spent on building facilities such as the irrigation system will go to waste,” said the former state secretary, who spent over 30 years in the civil service, including serving the Penang state government under two different administrations.

Farizan stressed that PSI was being planned for high-technology industries and development in the future, and not for profit, adding that the state government was committed towards mitigating

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“The state government will implement ecology offset programmes, such as mangrove planting, and control measures to mitigate the project’s impact.

“No physical work at the earmarked site will take off until the project has secured all necessary approvals.”

The Penang government still needs to resecure the Environmental Department’s (DOE) nod for the project’s Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) report. The earlier approval in 2019 was revoked in September this year by the DOE’s Appeals Board over technical issues.

“All conditions in the EIA and the Environmental Management Plan will be followed to the letter to minimise the impact and to enable conservation,” he said.

Farizan said part of the EIA also required the Penang government to address impact on fishermen in the area, which had led the state’s fishermen taskforce to provide suitable socioeconomic programmes for the community.

“The state intends to assist those who want to continue fishing. Therefore, Tier 1 boat owners will each receive a new boat and engine under the Social Impact Management Plan (SIMP),” he said, referring to those from the Permatang Tepi Laut, Sungai Batu, Teluk Kumbar and Gertak Sanggul fishermen units.

“Their crew and other Tier 2 fishermen will also receive appropriate assistance from the state under the SIMP, including free tuition for their children who are still in school. We want to see children from the fishing villages do well academically and benefit from the project.”

The PSI development, Farizan said, would also address climate change concerns like rising sea levels, building higher platforms for the islands to face rising sea levels; providing water catchments and green spaces to prevent surface runoffs; and implementing other green initiatives and policies.

## Plan is still on

Despite the challenges, Farizan said the state was still pursuing the PSI plan, adding that a judicial review of the Appeal Board’s decision would be filed by Dec 7.

The state government and project delivery partner SRS Consortium are also working on resubmitting the project’s EIA Report, he said. The report is now being updated and expected to be submitted to the DOE in the first quarter of 2022.

“The report will be on public display and scrutinised by the DOE’s technical review committee. Going by the department’s SOP, we expect a decision in the third quarter (of 2022).

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Along the Tun Dr Lim Chong Eu Expressway is reclaimed land used for mixed development along the Jelutong coastal area.

“If all goes well, we will get the EMP approved next. With God’s will, we hope the project can kick off next October.”

Farizan said the state government’s stand in pursuing PSI was because the development would have significant contributions to Penang, the northern region and the country’s economy.

“Therefore, PSI is still on but just a bit delayed.”

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