

'Rezoning won't harm ashram'

DBKL assures protection under National Heritage Act but concerns remain

By **BAVANI M**
bavanim@thestar.com.my

KUALA Lumpur City Hall (DBKL) says specific control measures are in place to protect the historic Vivekananda Ashram in Brickfields despite the area being rezoned for commercial development.

In a statement to *StarMetro*, DBKL said the measures included the planning control layer for zones and heritage buildings in Kuala Lumpur.

DBKL, however, did not specify the measures, apart from saying that they were outlined in "Volume 1 Part 1: Development Control of the Draft Kuala Lumpur Local Plan 2040 (KLLP2040)".

The local authority said this was despite the area the ashram is located was designated as "Main Commercial Land Use Zone" in the KLLP2040.

The statement also said the Vivekananda Ashram was classified as a "Category 1 Heritage Building" under the National Heritage Act (Act 645).

Consequently, any development or modifications to the building must be approved by the National Heritage Department (JWN).

DBKL said this in response to a March 23 *StarMetro* report that highlighted residents' concerns in a briefing with Save Kuala Lumpur Coalition (SKL).

Alarmed by the rezoning of the land surrounding the heritage building for high-density commercial development, residents voiced concerns about



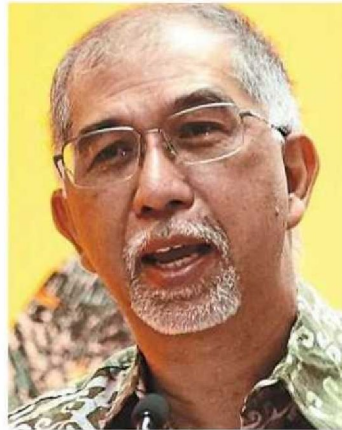
Kulasegaran said consultation with Heritage Commissioner is required for any proposed work within 200m of the ashram.

potential redevelopment and the future of the area's cultural heritage.

The issue was also addressed in a recent Parliament session by Deputy Minister in the Prime Minister's Department (Law and Institutional Reform) M. Kulasegaran, who responded to a question by Senator Nelson Renganathan regarding the land classification issue.

Kulasegaran reiterated DBKL's stance that buildings like Vivekananda Ashram, Carcosa Seri Negara, Bangunan Sultan Abdul Samad and Royal Selangor Club, all gazetted heritage sites under the Act, were protected.

When contacted, Kulasegaran told *StarMetro* that DBKL would not approve any development that contradicted its heritage status.



Muhammad Bakhtiar agrees with residents' request to ensure proper buffer zones are put in place surrounding the building.

"This includes any work done to the building such as modifications, alterations, annexes and even paint work, which must receive prior advice and feedback from the Heritage Commissioner under Section 40 of National Heritage Act 2005," he said.

He added that consultations with the Heritage Commissioner was required for any proposed work within 200m of the ashram.

Kulasegaran said the designation of the land as main commercial only pertained to the general zoning for Brickfields and did not affect the ashram's protected status.

Stakeholders, on the other hand, argued that DBKL's statement was contradictory and misleading, which could potentially lead to future complications.

More calls to protect ashram

NGOs highlight concern against commercialisation plans for KL's iconic building

By **BAVANI M**
bavanim@thestar.com.my

BADAN Warisan Malaysia has joined the chorus of discontent surrounding the uncertain fate of the iconic Vivekananda Ashram site in Brickfields, Kuala Lumpur. The president Lim Wee-Lang expressed dismay at the changes outlined in the draft Kuala Lumpur Local Plan 2040 (KLLP2040), highlighting concern over the lack of due process in rezoning a gazetted heritage site in Brickfields to a commercial zone.

"We question both the blatant change of land use knowing fully well that it is a gazetted heritage site, and the complete disregard for what 'gazette' means," she said.

She was responding to a *StarMetro* report on March 23.

"This building's level of significance is not only high in Brickfields and Kuala Lumpur but it is also significant nationally and internationally," she said. Lim added that the Brickfields area, also known as the "Chinese Location," holds significance due to its diverse places of worship representing various faiths.

Lim Metro had reported that during a recent briefing with the Save Kuala Lumpur Coalition (SKL), residents were appalled to find that land around the ashram, building was just designated as a heritage site in the KLLP2040.

But instead was classified as a major commercial zone with a high plot ratio.

This resolution sparked concern among residents about potential redevelopment plans and the preservation of the area's cultural heritage.

Lim said Vivekananda Ashram has been part of the historical development of Brickfields with



Flashback of the *StarMetro* report on March 23

heritage significance in Brickfields. "The high level of tourism to the area reflects the appreciation of Brickfields' unique heritage and many tourists visit Vivekananda Ashram to begin their tour of the area," she added.

Lim said gazetted a heritage site is meant to safeguard a town

DBKL chairman Datuk M. Ali said a mode as well as to grant a building with heritage status, but currently designate the surrounding land of the site as major commercial.

"Where is the buffer zone as required by the National Heritage Act 2005?" he questioned, and wondered about the thought process of Kuala Lumpur City Hall (DBKL) planners when preparing the plan.

If this draft plan goes through, what we will have is a historical building that is completely overshadowed by surrounding skyscrapers in the future. Its significance in history will be lost," Ali said.

Meanwhile, the planned potential project scheduled for yesterday against the designation of certain parts of Brickfields as major commercial sites in the KLLP2040 had to be postponed because the organisers were unable to find a venue.

Flashback to the *StarMetro* report on March 29.

Resident P. Tamilwanan said in KLLP2040, there was detailed breakdown of 10 primary classifications and 25 sub-classifications of land use.

He said Vivekananda Ashram fell under the major commercial sub-classification – designated for high-intensity commercial use aimed at generating employment and attracting skilled workers.

"According to the plan, areas zoned as major commercial must allocate at least 90% of the land for commercial purposes, with a specific target of 676ha outlined for major commercial development, including the area where the ashram is situated.

"We are disputing this zoning proposal and advocating for the ashram to be categorised under the public facilities sub-classification."

Tamilwanan said this designation was tailored for community-centric activities such as those

related to religion, culture, recreation and healthcare, aligning closely with the ashram's mission over its 120-year history.

When contacted, former deputy Tourism, Arts and Culture minister Muhammad Bakhtiar Wan Chik said the ashram's heritage status would not fully protect it from future development or encroachment, as he had seen happen with Carcosa building.

"When a third party carried out renovation and repairs on the iconic building, it was not sanctioned by JWN," he added.

"During my tenure as deputy minister, I was informed that during the filming of *Crazy Rich Asians*, refurbishment and painting were carried out without permission from JWN, compromising the integrity of the heritage building.

He agreed with residents' request to rezone the ashram and putting in place buffer zones surrounding the building.