Ground rules tightened

Excavation works in the capital are facing greater scrutiny from Kuala Lumpur City Hall. Other than compound fines and stop-work orders, repeat offenders who fail to follow procedures may hit rock bottom with their permits cancelled and getting blacklisted.

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Road digging works taking place at Lorong Maarof in Bangsar. — Photos: KAMARUL ARIFFIN and YAP CHEE HONG/The Star

Contractors digging up in KL to submit daily reports

City Hall also steps up enforcement to ensure compliance

By BAVANI M
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YOUR RIGHT to know

AS PART of efforts to ensure contractors excavating in the city are accountable, Kuala Lumpur City Hall (DBKL) has made it compulsory for them to submit daily reports.

DBKL is also intensifying its enforcement by conducting surprise inspections and getting multiple internal departments involved, such as Civil Engineering and Drainage, Enforcement, Urban Transportation and even its integrity unit.

"Contractors and utility companies found in breach of regulations face stringent action.

"This is to ensure that contractors carry out excavation works properly in the city when upgrading infrastructure or doing road digging work, such as installing utility cables," said DBKL executive director (Project Management) Mohamad Hamim.

"Apart from the conditions outlined in the Street, Drainage and Building Act 1974 (Act 133), contractors are required to submit daily reports via a dedicated WhatsApp group for excavation works exceeding 500m in size."

Mohamad added that those found in violation of DBKL guidelines or not performing in accordance with the set standards would be subject to fines under the Act.

"If contractors continue to commit repeated offences even after several compounds have been issued, action will be taken, which includes not renewing their permit until the compound is settled.

"A stop-work order may also be imposed for a certain period or until all necessary repairs have been made.

"In severe cases, the permit can be cancelled and the contractor blacklisted for a certain period," he said.

Mohamad added that in the most recent spot checks carried out in June and July on several city roads, including Jalan Sungai Besi, Jalan Kuchai Lama, Jalan Genting Kelang, Jalan Kilang, Jalan Kepong Lama, Jalan Tasik Selatan 31 and Jalan Tasik Selatan 21, and Jalan Dutamas 2 between 10pm and 4am, multiple fines were issued.

These spot checks revealed that many contractors were breaching guidelines, including working beyond the stipulated hours, not putting up proper traffic signage, closing roads without obtaining prior permission and failing to adhere to safety and cleanliness standards by dumping construction debris on the road, endangering the public. Compounds were issued on the spot.

According to Mohamad, for city roads generally, DBKL employs four methods of road digging — open cut (direct trench or hole excavation in the ground), micro trenching (narrower and shallower trenches typically constructed to lay utility cables), pipe jacking (where pipes are pushed into the ground using hydraulic jacks) and horizontal directional drilling (this technique allows for underground drilling without disturbing the surface).

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Prof Chiang: It is no secret that because of low profit margins, contractors tend to cut corners.

"Method selection depends on factors such as soil conditions, the presence of existing utility cables and the surrounding built environment," he said.

Among the common violations committed by contractors during excavation works are improper soil compaction and incomplete backfilling.

"This occurs when the dug trench is not filled with the appropriate materials and not properly compacted, causing voids and subsequently, depressions or uneven surfaces.

"Another issue is traffic management, where contractors fail to implement effective traffic control measures, posing risks to road users, site workers and residents nearby," added Mohamad.

Other infringements to the standard operating procedure (SOP) include carrying out road digging beyond the stipulated time, not placing proper traffic signs, closing roads without permission, not clearing the road and endangering the public.

As such, DBKL has set conditions for carrying out excavation work on public roads in Kuala Lumpur.

To improve the quality and safety level of excavation work, various measures are being considered and implemented.

This includes workshops for contractors organised by the Malaysia Productivity Corporation (MPC).

In addition, DBKL is also reviewing its SOP to include contractors taking up practical courses organised by the Construction Industry Development Board (CIDB) or any training provider.

City Hall has been grappling with complaints from the public about shoddy road digging works for many years, said Mohamad.

Contractors, especially utility contractors, were not resurfacing the road properly, with some doing such a bad job that potholes would appear soon after.

"Some didn't even clean up the project site when the job was completed," he said.

There have been cases where their shoddy patch-up work resulted in scupper drains being covered up.

To prevent bad patch-up jobs, DBKL even banned utility companies from hiring their own contractors for a period of time.

In 2015, DBKL said the task of hiring contractors for road digging projects fell under the local authority but the move proved ineffective and was shelved after some time.

Later, the local authority set up a pothole task force for the public to send their complaints and photos for further action.

"There are several steps taken in addressing public complaints regarding poor quality work.

"We regularly carry out on-site inspections and investigations to identify any violations that have occurred.

"If it involves the assets of utility companies, we will forward the complaints to the company for further action," he said.

Mohamad encouraged the public to file complaints via City Hall's Adu@KL platform, as complaints would be recorded and sent to the relevant department.

Institution of Engineers Malaysia (IEM) president Prof Dr Jeffrey Chiang said in cases of big projects that required road digging and traffic diversions, it was always good practice to keep the community informed.

Prof Chiang added that it was the responsibility of a site supervisor to ensure project site safety.

"The site engineer must be aware of what's happening at the site and not the contractor.

"If he sees something that is not right, then he must get the contractor to correct it," he said.

Prof Chiang added that in the case of shoddy work, repairs might keep getting damaged because of cost-cutting measures.

"It is no secret that because of low profit margins, contractors tend to cut corners.

"And one of the first things to be compromised is cutting down on human resources.

"So that extra worker that is supposed to clean up the site and ensure safety could be the one that gets the boot.

"Nowadays, developers and main contractors avoid keeping permanent staff to cut costs associated with salaries, medical benefits and other expenses."

Prof Chiang said they preferred hiring freelancers, with the main contractor typically having only one or two supervisors.

He added that back in the day, projects that used to have a 5% profit margin could now be as low as 1% because of intense competition.

And some projects were subcontracted, sometimes multiple times, making it harder to maintain a profit margin, he said.

"Some companies bid for jobs even if they are not qualified because they have connections.

"They act as a front to secure the job. If the profit margin is 5%, they might give the subcontractor only 2%.

"Often, the blame lies not with the contractor but with the client, who frequently makes changes and expects it done without extra cost," said Prof Chiang.

Residents want better engagement with DBKL on projects

ROAD digging works to lay pipes, utility cables and other infrastructure are a major inconvenience for communities in the area, say residents interviewed by *StarMetro*.

Shoddy construction and poor site management have compounded the problem.

Often, residents say construction debris is left at the site, construction blinkers are not placed to alert motorists and pedestrians and the area is not cordoned off with sandbags.

Residents of old townships experiencing rapid development, such as Bangsar and Brickfields, are seeking more holistic engagement with Kuala Lumpur City Hall (DBKL), developers and contractors on work being carried out in their neighbourhoods.

Many are unhappy with DBKL's current policy regarding project approvals where the responsibility to communicate with those affected falls to developers and service providers, such as telecommunication and utilities companies.

"Once DBKL approves a project, it becomes the responsibility of the developers and utility companies to brief local communities about the work," said Bukit Bandaraya residents association advisor Datuk M. Ali.

"This hands-off approach by DBKL has led to significant communication gaps and frustration.

"DBKL should be the one directly engaging with local communities and representatives such as residents associations (RAs), Rukun Tetangga (RTs) and community organisations," Ali said.

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Naidu says regular meetings with residents can promote transparency.

Contractors should never leave construction debris on walkways. — Filepic

The lack of engagement from DBKL could lead to situations where contractors might disregard residents' concerns, he added.

"One contractor would carry out work at irregular hours," he said.

Ali added that the RA had to intervene to halt further works because of the absence of effective engagement and communication from DBKL.

"If DBKL had organised a proper engagement session, such hardships for the local community could have been avoided."

Ali said DBKL's presence could ensure contractors were held accountable for their work quality, reducing instances of subpar repairs and potholes.

Brickfields RT chairman SKK Naidu said keeping the communication channel open between the local authority and residents' groups would help build trust.

"Regular meetings with residents can promote transparency in how projects are planned and executed.

"Proper planning and communication can minimise disruption to daily life, ensure high-quality infrastructure and enhance civic participation by engaging residents in the process," said Naidu. — By BAVANI M

Contractors laying out water pipes in a housing area in Seri Petaling.

DBKL enforcement team carrying out a spot check at a construction site in downtown Kuala Lumpur. — Courtesy photo