Green dream flushed

Despite public objections, majority of the 60 decommissioned sewage treatment plants in Kuala Lumpur are rezoned for development, dashing residents' hopes for more parks and open spaces. >2&3

Rezoning concern: An aerial shot of Taman Gembira and Taman Bukit Indah, off Jalan Kelang Lama in Kuala Lumpur, showing plots of land (brown patches) which are former sewage treatment plants that have been targeted for development. — IZZRAFIQ ALIAS/The Star

The Star EXCLUSIVE

KL folk fear green spaces going down the drain

They question City Hall's decision to earmark most idle sewage treatment plants for development

By BAVANI M
bavanim@thestar.com.my

ONCE crucial to Kuala Lumpur's sanitation system, decommissioned sewage treatment plant (STP) sites across the city are slowly being turned into prime real estate for profit.

Previously operated by Indah Water Konsortium (IWK) to process sewage from surrounding areas, these sites lie vacant after being replaced by centralised systems.

Now fenced off and lying idle, many are lucrative plots targeted for redevelopment.

According to the newly gazetted Kuala Lumpur Local Plan 2040 (KLLP2040), there are 60 STP sites across the city.

While city dwellers have hoped these unutilised plots would be preserved as green lungs in the urban sprawl, only 10, or 17% have been designated for public open spaces such as pocket parks and urban farms.

In contrast, 32 sites (53%) are earmarked for commercial and residential development, including food courts, carparks and high-rises.

During the public objection period for the draft KLLP2040 last year, concerns were raised that many STP sites in residential areas had been "discreetly" rezoned for commercial use.

In areas such as Taman Gembira (Happy Garden) and Taman Bukit Indah off Jalan Kelang Lama, residents discovered that almost 10 STPs in their neighbourhoods had been rezoned.

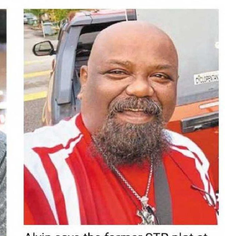
"We were shocked when we saw the draft plan. Some of these STP plots are pretty big and are perfect for public parks which residents desperately need, but they are also a developer's dream," said Happy Garden and Continental Park Residents Association secretary Evelyne Low.

She said several decommissioned sites were located in Happy Garden, Taman United, Taman Overseas United (OUG) and Taman Bukit Indah along roads such as Jalan Nyaman, Jalan Jiran and Jalan Lazat.

Evelyne said the association submitted 20 objections to Kuala Lumpur City Hall (DBKL) on the proposed rezonings, but only two were partially accepted in the final plan which was gazetted on May 28 and came into effect this year on June 11.

This abandoned sewage treatment site in Jalan Mega Mendung, off Jalan Kelang Lama, sits on a 0.07ha lot. The land has been rezoned for a two-storey food court. — Photos: YAP CHEE HONG, AZLINA ABDULLAH and LOW LAY PHON/The Star

Evelyne (left) and Joshua looking at the number of STPs rezoned for commercial projects in KLLP2040.



Alvin says the former STP plot at Jalan Mega Mendung is too small for a two-storey food court.

Tan says remaining open plots from former STP sites are some of the last few green spaces left in KL's older neighbourhoods.

Breathing space please

Stakeholders are hoping for some of these former IWK sites to be preserved as green pockets, offering respite in a dense and fast-developing city where open spaces are dwindling.

According to the KLLP2040, about 18 plots of land off Jalan Kelang Lama, mostly former sewage treatment facilities, have been converted from "infrastructure and utility" use to "commercial zoning".

Four others have been reclassified for low-density residential (R1), while the remaining 12 lots around Jalan Nyaman fall under "established housing" (EH) category.

"At Jalan Nyaman 5 and 6, Lots 18188, 18189, and 18190 are combined for a low-density housing project following a Rule 7 notice issued last year," said Evelyne.

Rule 7 of the Federal Territory Planning Act 1982 covers the public participation process requiring landowners to be given notice for objection to any new development in their neighbourhood.

Evelyne added that the established housing category limits developments to two or three storeys to preserve the character of stable residential areas.

"Anything above that, such as R2, R3, or R4 zoning follows a plot ratio system – allowing for higher-density projects like commercial developments."

A plot ratio is the ratio between a building's total floor area and size of land it occupies.

A 1:4 ratio, for example, could permit buildings of 20 to 30 storeys, depending on design and layout.

Rezoning without liveability

Kuala Lumpur Residents Action for Sustainable Development Association honorary secretary Joshua Low said the group had submitted formal feedback to DBKL last year.

The association, he said, strongly objected to the rezoning of some lots into one commercial plot with a high 1:6 ratio.

"Originally, the STP plot was categorised as 'infrastructure and utility – water supply', but in the draft, it was redesignated to 'main commercial'.

"We argued that it should instead have been reclassified as public or private open space.

"Jalan Kelang Lama is under severe traffic strain; it simply cannot absorb more development," said Joshua.

He added that under KLLP2040, any new development should consider location, infrastructure capacity, site conditions, and compatibility with existing land use.

"When we brought this up with DBKL planners during the open day in May, we were told the site would be limited to low-density, three-storey bungalows.

"How can we accept vague verbal assurances?" asked Joshua.

In May, DBKL held an open day to show the public the revised version of KLLP 2040.

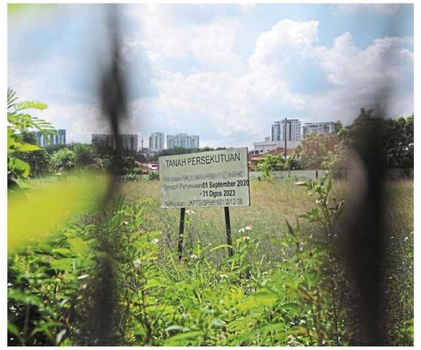
Evelyne and Joshua expressed disappointment that only two of the 20 objections they submitted, last year, were partially taken into account in the final plan.

Why another food court?

One of the more questionable cases involves Lot 19542, a narrow plot sitting along the Jalan Mega Mendung commercial area in Taman United, Kuala Lumpur.

Initially proposed for a four-storey commercial block, it has since been revised to accommodate a two-storey hawker centre.

Jalan Mega Mendung is often congested due to double-parking. The revised plan to build a two-storey hawker centre at the former STP here in Taman United has raised concerns about parking and waste disposal.



A sign marking this overgrown plot in Happy Garden, off Jalan Kelang Lama, as federal land which has been leased to a private company.

Chin says he did not know old sewage plants are making way for redevelopment.

"The site is only 0.07ha. It's too small, and yet, a two-storey food court is being squeezed into the site. It's unrealistic and shows no regard for proper planning," said Seputeh Residents Representative Council chairman Alvin T. Ariaratnam.

"Where are people supposed to park? Where will the waste go?

"A hawker centre needs space for ventilation, rubbish collection, and customer flow, not to mention loading and unloading. It's just not practical."

He said the area was already congested and prone to double-parking.

"This area has numerous eateries and a DBKL-run food court is just three minutes away," he said.

Alvin added that roads like Jalan Mega Mendung, Jalan Sepakat, and Jalan Sepadu were struggling under the weight of traffic from unchecked development.

Urban green lifeline

Federal Territory MCA deputy chairman Tan Kok Eng said the remaining open plots from former STP sites were some of the last few green spaces left in Kuala Lumpur's older neighbourhoods.

"In a city that's growing taller and denser by the day, green lungs are not a luxury, they're a lifeline," he said.

"Once these spaces are gone, they're gone for good. We don't need more concrete towers choking our streets.

"We need places where children can play, the elderly can stroll, and communities can reconnect.

"If DBKL is serious about making Kuala Lumpur liveable, then these sites must be preserved for the public, not handed over for profit."

Salak South Village MCA branch deputy chairman Banie Chin did not hide his frustration.

"We had no idea these old sewage plant sites were being taken over.

"There was one in Seri Petaling, and now its being used for a condominium project.

"Nobody asks the residents anything, but we're the ones stuck with the noise, traffic jams, and overcrowding.

"People like to talk about mental health and community well-being, but how are we supposed to have a liveable city when every bit of open space gets turned into concrete?" Chin said.