

Token RM1 for ferry service takeover

Prasarana to brand water transport as rapidFerry starting next month

By **ARNOLD LOH**

arnold.loh@thestar.com.my

GEORGE TOWN: Come next month, Penang's ferry service will be called rapidFerry when it is officially taken over by Prasarana Malaysia Bhd from current operator Penang Port Sdn Bhd (PPSB).

This will end the ferry service's uncertainty, which has gone on for nearly a decade.

A source said Prasarana will take over the ferry service for a token sum of RM1.

Since 1985, with the opening of the Penang Bridge, each ferry would have incurred at least RM700

in losses for every trip it made.

It is believed that PPSB would pay a large annual sum to Prasarana for a few years to help it cope with the losses.

The source said negotiations had been difficult because one of the previous terms discussed was to halt the vehicular ferry service within two or three years after the takeover.

"But the Transport Ministry refused to allow it to end.

"There is too much tourism and heritage value in Penang's vehicular ferry service," the source said.

Penang Port Commission (PPC)

chairman Datuk Tan Teik Cheng confirmed that the deal has been finalised and is now awaiting the Cabinet's stamp of approval.

"Most of the time, out-of-town cars wait for our ferries.

"Since visitors to Penang love taking the ferry so much, Prasarana will look into improving the experience for them," he said.

Tan said PPC remained as the overseer of the service and was excited about catamarans joining the existing ferry fleet.

"Catamarans to transport pedestrians, cyclists and motorcyclists will be faster. This will reduce

travel time and in that sense, life between the island and the mainland will be closer," he said.

PPSB started actively pushing for the separation of the ferry service from other port operations after public-listed MMC Corp Bhd announced that it would acquire all of PPSB's shares.

Tycoon Tan Sri Syed Mokhtar Al-Bukhary took over PPSB in January 2014 and within two years turned it around with a net profit of RM2.2mil.

Plans to publicly list PPSB had been held back by the ferry service losses.

Prasarana is the largest public

transport provider in Malaysia, operating several train and bus services nationwide, including Rapid Penang buses.

Although Prasarana has not made any public statements on the deal, Rapid Penang posted a picture of the rapidFerry logo on its Facebook page on Friday.

In 2015, the Penang government made a bid to take over the ferries, but negotiations halted because it could not get its full wish list met, which included 30 pre-approved licences for water taxis, freedom from PPC as the federal overseer and to take over minus the past losses.