

SE PrimeSpace
HD **Lang walks the talk on Malaysia mega project**
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AT a time when some of Asia's largest **residential** developers are investing heavily in Australia, billionaire developer Lang Walker has gone against the tide, undertaking a development with a potential end value of \$5 billion in Johor, the southern most state in Malaysia.

The project, Senibong Cove, is the single largest for Walker Corporation and a major cash generator for the **company**. It is being undertaken by Front Concept, Mr Walker's Malaysian **company**.

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"It is an exciting project. I can talk for hours about this project," said Mr Walker, who visits the **site** every two months and is intimately involved with planning, down to the design details of individual houses.

Senibong Cove is being designed to incorporate the elements of his most successful projects in Australia — Hope **Island**/Sanctuary Cove (on the Gold Coast) and Rhodes Waterside and King Street Wharf (in Sydney).

So far, about \$100 million has been spent on infrastructure, including reclamation works to create an **island**, canals, a marina, landscaping and a network of boardwalks along the waterfront bordering the **estate**.

The development has generated sales totalling 1 billion ringgit (\$330 million) since the first stage was launched in 2010.

Mr Walker's vision is to build between 12,000 and 14,000 dwellings on the 89ha **site** in the exclusive integrated waterfront community.

The development's first 250 low-rise dwellings **sold** quickly 18 months ago. And prices for those homes have since doubled.

About 80 per cent of buyers are from Singapore, and many are trading up to the bigger houses in the second stage.

The first two 30-storey towers in phase three have also **sold** well. But the third tower is likely to face competition from other **residential** projects.

First Concept's advantage, however, will be price. Mr Walker bought what were then prawn farms and swampland in 2005 long before a rush of developers from Singapore and **China** sent land prices soaring.

China's Country Garden is proposing to reclaim land in Johor for a waterfront project offering 30,000 apartments while another **Chinese group**, Greenland, is talking about an equally ambitious **residential** development.

The Senibong Cove project is one third of the way to completion, due in about eight years. A 15,000sq m retail and restaurant precinct will front a wide boardwalk, as at Sydney's King Street Wharf, complete with a marina and a yacht club.

Continued on Page 30 Continued from Page 27 This phase is expected to be ready in two years. Mr Walker has employed a team of 70 local staff, headed by project director Quay Chew Keong, who had worked for Malaysian tycoon Robert Kuok, one of Asia's wealthiest men, before Mr Kuok **sold** his Malaysian operations in 2009.

Mr Quay, who was the Kuok **Group**'s project manager for the development of two Sydney inner-city high-rise **apartment** blocks — Market City and Horizon — has worked on projects with Walker Corporation, including on Collins Square in Melbourne's Docklands.

Mr Walker said he was originally looking to partner the Kuok **Group** in retail projects in Johor Bahru, but when Kuok changed its plans in the wake of the GFC he decided to continue on his own.

Although Walker Corporation has developed smaller projects overseas, including in the US, Mr Walker said none would rival the size of Senibong Cove.

He has also formed a joint-venture with a Singapore **company** to develop an adjoining 16ha, known as Senibong Hill.

"Senibong Cove ticks all the boxes from our point of view. You've got the (high) cost of **property** in Singapore, the proximity (to Singapore), water frontage and security." Mr Walker, who will celebrate his 50th year in the development industry this year, noted that the price of Senibong Cove homes were a quarter of comparable homes in Singapore.

The architectural **firm**, which designed the exclusive bungalows in Sentosa, a resort **island** off Singapore, is designing waterfront bungalows in Senibong Cove.

Mr Walker said that about 100,000 people travelled to Singapore from Johor Bahru daily to work, choosing to live in the Malaysian city because of its affordable housing.

But the overriding reason, Mr Walker said, was the Malaysian government's and the state government's plan for Iskandar, which has attracted tens of billions of dollars in state and federal funds to develop infrastructure, such as expressways, under the country's Economic Transformation Plan.

The blueprint for Iskandar, covering 2217sq km, includes educational, entertainment, **residential**, **commercial** and industrial precincts, aimed at creating a dynamic Johor state that would benefit from the economic strength of neighbouring Singapore.

Crucially, for developers such as Walker Corporation, are the Malaysian government's plans to bring a fast train from Kuala Lumpur to JohorBahru.

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