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Phuket Local News
Ao Phuket Revisited

A megaproject in the works for 20 years recently won approval and a generally positive reception from local leaders (2008-06-17 11:41:58)

by Witchureerat Kunprom

After nearly two decades of discussion, the megaproject Ao Phuket, which would build a convention center, marina, dockyards, restaurants, hotels, resorts and a business centre on reclaimed land in the bay south of Phuket City, won a critical go-ahead from the government last month. Prime Minister Samak Sundaravej assigned the Ao Phuket project to the Designated Areas for Sustainable Tourism Administration (DASTA), an agency organized under the Ministry of Tourism and sports in 2005.

On May 29, DASTA looked to the people of Phuket for response to the 100 billion baht megaproject. Most of the local leaders and residents at the meeting thought the project a good idea, but many wanted to make sure that the government was clear about the development plan. Also, many said that DASTA should look to target all of Phuket as an area of sustainable tourism and work to deal with many local issues related to a booming tourism industry. DASTA Director Vorrasin Rojanapanich and Rachatin Sayamanon, president of DASTA's Ao Phuket project committee, jointly led the meeting at the Phuket Merlin Hotel.

Khun Rachatin explained that the Ao Phuket project was created in 1989 by the Phuket Provincial Administration Organization (PPAO), which wanted to clean out Phuket Bay and to push Phuket as a seaport. The PPAO hired the Environment Research Institute to study the project and understand environmental effects. Once approved by the Harbour Department and the Department of Fisheries, the plan went to the Ministry of Interior to await approval before moving forward. The government's Ao Phuket project stalled at that stage nearly a decade ago.

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The plan for Ao Phuket covers 2,200 rai divided into two islands. One, called MICE island, using an acronym for "meetings, incentives, conventions and exhibitions", will house a convention centre, two exposition centres, restaurants, hotels, resorts, a business centre and a shopping centre. Marina Island will provide ship and yacht docks, dockyards, hotels and other accommodations. The budget for Ao Phuket originally planned for an expenditure of 65 billion baht, of which around 37 billion baht was for MICE Island and around 26 billion baht for Marina Island. The current price tag is expected to exceed 100 million baht.

"For me as a representative of the people of Phuket who joined the conference today, I can't deny that this is a good project," explained Chalermrat Kebsab, a member of the Democrat (Prachatipat) Party, also a participant in the conference. "But DASTA should announce that all of Phuket province is a designated area, and it should inform more people, such as villagers and people who live here in Phuket, so they know about this project widely instead of just the hundreds of people here who have joined the conference.

"Because this project is really quite a big project, DASTA should open the stage to dialogue with people in Phuket," she continued. "It should talk about what DASTA is, how DASTA will be a participant in joining to develop Phuket. It should talk about what DASTA is going to do to develop Phuket and whether things in Phuket are going to change. These things will make people understand. DASTA should open a broad dialogue so that the project can move on. I believe that if people understand the objectives of the project, and if most people agree with DASTA, the project can move on."

Banyat Jariyalerpong echoed many of Khun Chalermrat's points. A representative of the Phuket Provincial Cultural Council, he noted that a strong program of community education could head off protests that might doom the project.

"Phuket people like me aren't against the project as it stands," he said. "As a representative of Phuket, I knew about DASTA and the project, but many people were not informed about it and about this public hearing today. DASTA should explain the advantages of this project and even the disadvantages of the project. If you don't tell the people about the project, they might protest against it, and the project might collapse or fail like many projects that people don't understand."

Phuket businessman Mit Singsatjakul urged DASTA to take on a larger mission for developing Phuket.

"For me personally, I agree with continuing this project, but I prefer to develop all of Phuket province to solve the larger problems Phuket has as well," he said.

Khun Vorrasin concluded the conference noting that the public hearing was just the first step in reviving the Ao Phuket project. DASTA would hold more conferences, he said, to collect more opinions and ideas and to accept all suggestions from local people.

"We may be moving too fast, like many people said, so we will hold conferences to listen to the voices from people in Phuket," he said. "We want to make the people trust the Ao Phuket project and DASTA."

"I firmly believe that this project will be absolutely useful for people who live in Phuket," Rachatin added. "If Phuket is approved as a designated area, we will have to do more research and study the effects carefully and clearly to earn the trust of the Phuket people and the confidence of the companies who invest in Thailand. The lingering problems of Phuket, such as traffic jams, garbage, and air pollution, will be reduced, and we'll be able to solve other problems faster as well."

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