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Jebel Ali free trade zone aims to repeat Dubai success at Port Klang

JEBEL Ali Free Trade Zone helped to transform Dubai into a large container port and now the people behind it are looking to do the same with Port Klang.

The situation is, of course, not quite the same. Port Klang is already the 14th largest container port in the

world with a volume of 5.5m teu last year.

However, after a decade of phenomenal growth things have slowed at the largest port in Malaysia and Port Klang Authority has moved to develop a free trade zone to guarantee future growth.

The authority invested

MYR1bn (US\$265m) in building the zone and then brought in Jebel Ali Free Trade Zone on a 15-year management contract.

Running the show for its Dubai managers is Noel Gulliver, who has previously worked for Esnat Airport in the southern state of

Johor and Maerak in Singapore.

Things are pretty much finished and ready to go and Mr Gulliver has travelling extensively of late, including visits to China, Germany and Britain to promote the Free Trade Zone and bring in tenants.

The scale of the project is impressive — 500 warehouses and four office buildings on a 1,000-acre site.

The Jebel Ali model is being closely followed. "We have been given the task of developing a business environment as closely as possible mirroring Jebel Ali," explains Mr Gulliver.

The concept is that companies will be investing in a completely autonomous zone and will be licensed only to operate in the zone itself.

The authorities are also working a system to allow expatriates working in the free zone to be given six-month temporary work visas while paperwork is processed.

Some of these ideas might seem fraught with potential political pitfalls, but the project has been given strong public backing by the ministry of transport.

With land and labour costs half that of Singapore, but with a political stability which is lacking in many other southeast Asian nations apart from its neighbour, the free zone sees itself taking on a hub role in a region of 500m people.

"We see it as a logistics and trading hub for southeast Asia," Mr Gulliver says.

"Logistics is all about managing high volumes and thin margins."

The first tenant is already setting up its facilities — Norwegian oil and gas giant Aker Kvaerner.

As for driving volumes through Port Klang, a road will connect the Free Trade Zone straight into Westport Malaysia, the port's largest terminal.



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