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"A good starting point is letting the people know how much the government can afford to spend, especially in relation to the needs of other sectors who may also require funding," he elaborates.

As someone who has worked and lived in the Klang Valley and is currently based in Johor Baru, Johnson points out that Malaysians living outside the Klang Valley could also be wondering if mega development projects would be allocated to their respective regions, citing the example of the North-South Expressway in comparison to the MRT3.

From his observations, Johoreans are therefore happy that part of the expressway from Ayer Keroh to Johor Baru will be widened to six lanes from the current four, for better safety, efficiency and comfort of travel.

"Both the MRT3 and the expressway widening projects can be a catalyst for socio-economic growth, creating job opportunities for the rakyat," he adds.

Lending a measure of background to this, it was reported at the end of February that the Works Ministry is planning to upgrade the North-South Expressway in Johor from Yong Peng Utara to Senai Utara from the current four lanes to six lanes, albeit in stages.

Works Minister Datuk Seri Alexander Nanta Linggi has revealed that the project is estimated to cost RM525mil and has been included in the Third Rolling Plan of the 12th

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Malaysia Plan, while the 195km-long highway expansion project from Ayer Keroh to Johor Baru is valued at RM7.5bil.

Meanwhile, KAF Research senior analyst Mak Hoy Ken is hopeful that the MRT3 project would benefit the construction industry appreciably, since there has been a dearth of major construction jobs since 2018.

However, he is of the opinion that the benefits would not be evenly spread, especially because of the government's emphasis on transparent cost-recalibrating and open tendering.

"If construction jobs from here on are awarded based on merit in open tenders, then the cost-conscious and competitive firms would win, especially those with good track record such as Gamuda Bhd, IJM Corp Bhd, Malaysian Resources Corp Bhd, YTL Corp Bhd and Sunway Bhd.

"At the same time, smaller to mid-sized firms like WCT Holdings Bhd and Econpile

Holdings Bhd would also stand to garner some sub-construction jobs," says Mak.

On the prospects for the construction industry, he feels the absence of any new mega projects being announced, aside from MRT3, coupled with the fact that the government needs time to evaluate tenders properly means outlook is still primarily challenging for the smaller and mid-sized players, while the bigger companies would have the balance sheet and network to venture overseas to look for jobs.

However, Mak highlights that with the government seemingly intent on moving away from its hybrid financing model for projects, where contractors were expected to fund at least 10% of the costs, this would level the playing field somewhat between the bigger and smaller firms bidding for major projects, as the less sizeable players would have the financing burden lifted, being able to focus on merit-based bidding instead.

Maybank Investment Bank head of research Wong Chew Hann echoes Mak's view that the MRT3 would be an important catalyst for the construction sector, with multiple possible beneficiaries.

According to Wong, once the main contractors have been decided on the three main parcels of the MRT3 project, the smaller to mid-sized companies would be looking to take on second-tier jobs, with construction materials firms also potentially benefiting.

"Any major experienced player who is bidding for the three main civil work packages of the MRT3 can actually win.

"Meanwhile, some of the smaller and medium-sized contractors are still facing tough times. Their feedback is that the outlook is not looking too bright as there are not many projects around now," she says, adding that these smaller companies do have crucial supporting roles to play in mega projects.

With observers of the industry having presented their views from various perspectives, the government now has the task of performing the balancing act of rejuvenating the highly essential construction sector, while sticking to its policy of wastage and debt reduction.

The additional challenge of spreading out development projects to other areas of the country also carries its own complications, but it would be interesting at least to watch how it would all unfold as Malaysia goes further into 2023.