

By Chuah Bee Kim

THE maintenance, repair and overhaul (MRO) industry in Asia is expected to be as big as the ones in the United States and Europe over the next decade.

Capitalising on this, Senai Airport Terminal Services (SATS) Sdn Bhd is building the Senai Airport Aviation Park that is estimated to have a gross development value of about RM1.5 billion.

The aviation park is touted to put Senai, Iskandar Malaysia, Johor and the nation on the global aviation map.

Senai Airport will also get further boost from Iskandar Malaysia's recent proposal to Singapore on a twin-airport concept involving Changi Airport.

SATS deputy chief executive officer Safuan Basir said the recent announcements by AirAsia and Indonesia's low-cost carrier, Lion Air, on adding to their fleet of aircraft show that there is going to be a need for hangar space.

"As the Changi Airport in Singapore and the Kuala Lumpur International Airport are already well-established in commercial aviation, we are going to position ourselves as a business aviation hub instead.

"There are currently only two business aviation hubs in the region. One is Seletar Airport in Singapore, the other is Subang Airport in Kuala Lumpur," he told Business Times recently.

Safuan said the first phase of the aviation park, which will have a value of RM200 million to RM250 million, will start next month and is expected to be completed by the end of the year.

Once completed, it is expected to create about 5,000 jobs for skilled and semi-skilled workers over the next five years.

"Our rates will be more competitive and we are building the Senai Business Jet Terminal, which is expected to be operational in the third quarter of the year.

"The business jet terminal is going to be the first of its kind in Asia," he said.

Safuan said the business jet terminal will attract high-powered network people and celebrities as they can opt to continue their travel to Singapore, for instance, by road from the airport," he said.

Besides MRO, SATS is going to offer fixed base operator (FBO) services that will provide aeronautical services such as fuelling, hangaring, tie down and parking, aircraft rental, aircraft maintenance and flight instruction.

Currently, the biggest jet buyers are from China, India and Indonesia.

"Gone are the days when people showed off their yachts. Now, it is private jets," said Safuan.

On a separate matter, Safuan said plans for an exhibition like the Langkawi International Maritime and Aerospace exhibition are in the pipeline.

He said the event, which will be called the Iskandar International Aviation Show, will feature only corporate jets.

"It will be another tourism activity for the state and the fringe activities of the event will be air shows, flight demonstrations and flight simulations.

"We are in talks with the authorities to host the three-day event, which will probably be held in the first quarter of next year.

"Our office is flooded with enquiries regarding this event, even before we made any official announcement.

"It seems like everyone just wants this (the event) to happen," added Safuan.