

## Surakarta offers car-free night

People in Surakarta (commonly known as Solo) will have to think twice before deciding to celebrate New Year's Eve by parading through the streets in their cars.

The people will not be able to parade through the streets in their cars while sounding the horns loudly because the municipality, which received the Blue Sky Award from the Environment Ministry last week as a large city with the cleanest air, has decided to offer a car-free night on the New Year's Eve.

"We are probably the first city in Indonesia to offer a car-free night," head of Surakarta's Culture and Tourism Agency, Widdi Srihanto, said on Tuesday.

For the program, according to Widdi, the city's main street of Jl. Slamet Riyadi, which runs for 5.8 kilometers from Purwosari to Gladag, will be completely closed to cars, motorbikes and other motorized vehicles from 9 p.m. until midnight on New Year's Eve.

Widdi also said the car-free night program was being arranged as an implementation of the city's receiving the Blue Sky Award. It was designed to offer people the chance to celebrate New Year without being bothered by either smoke or loud noise resulting from convoys of vehicles.

"The basic concept of the program is to have people enjoy the New Year's Eve celebrations together in clean air and peace; not to have them line up alongside the street just watching cars," Widdi said.

A cultural parade involving 14 cultural groups will launch the car-free night with the Surakarta Palace traditional troops and the Solo Batik Carnival.

Seven stages will also be prepared along the north side of Jl. Slamet Riyadi, facing south, for local performances. "They will be divided according to the groups performing," chairman of the car-free night organizing committee, Anggoro Panji Nugroho, said.

When first introduced, the program received resistance from employers running hotels and businesses in downtown Surakarta. They argued the car-free night would make it difficult for their customers to access their establishments during New Year's Eve.

"We were worried about how our guests would enter the hotels, especially those along Jl. Slamet Riyadi," said Bambang Gunadi from the Surakarta branch of the Association of Indonesian Hotels and Restaurants (PHRI).

After a long discussion, he added, they finally agreed with the planned program on one condition: that it began from 9 p.m., not from 8 p.m. as initially planned, to allow time for hotel guests to check in.