

Long-Term Land Use Planning In Singapore

Introduction

The Singapore government has a well-deserved reputation for its long-term, forward looking approach to land use planning, earned largely because of its success in transforming the island-state from a chaotic ‘third-world’ country without adequate housing, basic sanitation and infrastructure in the 1960s, to the gleaming, efficient, well-run city it is today.

In recent years however, Singapore has experienced rapid population growth, largely due to immigration. As infrastructure growth could not catch up, the planning system was “thrown out of gear”¹ creating an unprecedented infrastructural crunch. In Mass Rapid Transit (MRT) stations, dense crowds would gather on the train platforms during peak hours, unable to squeeze onto the overcrowded train carriages. At the same time, house prices rose faster than income growth, due to a combination of the global liquidity glut, low interest rates, as well as public housing shortages.² As the rapid increase in numbers of foreigners introduced unfamiliar frictions into Singapore’s societal and political fabric, public dissatisfaction grew.

In response to growing public concerns over the long-term viability of its population policies and liveability of the island, the Singapore government formulated and released a Population White Paper³ titled “A Sustainable Population for a Dynamic Singapore” in January 2013. This paper was presented as “a necessary relook” at the responses needed to tackle the various challenges that had arisen. At the same time, the White Paper set out to address a demographic challenge that Singapore faced: an ageing population coupled with extremely low fertility rates

The policy roadmap set out in White Paper was described as a *major shift* in policy where the rate of workforce and population growth would be slowed, compared to their recent trajectories.⁴ Key proposals from the White Paper included more generous incentives to encourage Singaporeans to have children, and for Singapore to take in a controlled stream of new citizens and Permanent Residents to counteract the effects of an ageing population. The

¹ Teo Chee Hean, Opening Speech at the Parliamentary Debate on Population White Paper, 4 Feb 2013, <http://www.straitstimes.com/sites/straitstimes.com/files/DPM%20Opening%20Speech%204%20Feb%202013.pdf>

² Khaw Boon Wan, 2013 Budget Debate, “Shaping Housing Policies Together”, http://www.mnd.gov.sg/budgetdebate2013/speech_kbw.htm (cited 4 Nov 2013)

³ A White Paper refers to a policy document issued by the Government to explain or discuss matters. White Papers are often presented for debate in Parliament. Source: <http://population.sg/whitepaper/resource-files/population-white-paper.pdf>

⁴ Teo Chee Hean

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White Paper also envisaged a larger proportion of Singaporeans taking on Professional, Managerial, Executive and Technical (PMET) jobs, thereby creating the need for additional foreign workers in lower-skilled jobs. At the same time, high-skilled immigrants would also be needed to provide skills, expertise and access to new markets. The government would also plan Singapore's infrastructure developments well in advance, and implement them in a timely and effective way, with a buffer built in where possible.

The Population White Paper estimated a population of **6.5 to 6.9 million** people⁵ by 2030, based on anticipated birth rates, life expectancies, as well as the need for immigration and foreign labour based on the country's social and economic needs. In tandem with the Population White Paper, a forward-looking Land Use Plan was presented to the public, which articulated the government's proposed land use and infrastructure development strategy to support a population of 6.9 million by 2030.

Besides being a technical 'blue print' to guide the physical development of Singapore, the Land Use Plan could be read as an attempt to assure the public that a Singapore inhabited by 6.9 million would still be comfortable and liveable. The Land Use Plan report thus set out to show how the additional housing, facilities and amenities required would be accommodated within Singapore's limited area, and also spelt out the various improvements in transport infrastructure that would support such growth. It reassured readers that "together, we can build a high quality living environment for all Singaporeans, an outstanding city which we can all proudly and fondly call home"⁶.

Despite best intentions, the reactions to the Population White Paper and the accompanying Land Use Plan proved negative. The local blogger sphere and online forums exploded with critical articles and strident comments that accused the government of being irresponsible in opening the country up to yet more foreigners, of prioritising economic growth above all, and of generally being deaf to its citizens' wishes and needs.⁷ Over the course of a five-day long parliamentary debate on the Population White Paper, members from both sides of the House raised similar concerns about Singapore's future quality of living should the Population White Paper roadmap be implemented. More dramatically, public protests were organised, which garnered attention in international press because of the rarity of such occurrences here.⁸

⁵ This would consist of 3.6 to 3.8 million citizens, 0.5 to 0.6 million PRs and a non-resident population of 2.3 to 2.5 million.

⁶ A high quality living environment for all Singaporeans: Land Use Plan to Support Singapore's Future Population, Jan 2013, Pg 68, <http://www.mnd.gov.sg/landuseplan/e-book/>

⁷ Fann Sim "Fury over 6.9 million population target for Singapore", *Yahoo! Newsroom*, Jan 30 2013, <http://sg.news.yahoo.com/fury-over-6-9-million-population-target-for-singapore-103503070.html> (cited 21 Oct 2013); Kate Hodal, Singapore protest: 'Unfamiliar faces are crowding our land', *The Guardian*, Feb 15 2013, <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2013/feb/15/singapore-crisis-immigration-financial-crisis> (cited 21 Oct 2013); Example of criticism: <http://sg.news.yahoo.com/blogs/singaporescene/why-oppose-white-paper-nicole-seah-015700474.html> (cited 21 Oct 2013)

⁸ R.C., "To the Sudden Field!", *The Economist*, *Banyan Asia*, <http://www.economist.com/blogs/banyan/2013/02/protest-singapore>; Alex Au "Five thousand gather to protest population White Paper", *The YawningBread*, <http://yawningbread.wordpress.com/2013/02/17/five-thousand-gather-to-protest-population-white-paper/> (cited 21 Oct 2013)

While much of the public angst centred on the perceived economic and social downsides to increasing foreigner numbers (i.e. greater competition for jobs, lowering and stagnation of wages, fears of being displaced), many also voiced fears of a physically more crowded Singapore, and concerns that even after improvements, the urban infrastructure would not be able to shoulder the increased demands arising from a larger population. These concerns, coupled with the oft-heard refrain that the government should fix the current infrastructure problems first before planning for further increases⁹, indicated a great deal of scepticism that the proposed Land Use Plan could deliver on its promises of a better living environment.

The events leading up to the Population White Paper, and the subsequent public uproar over the government's proposed population policy roadmap and Land Use Plan raised key questions about the efficacy of long-term land use planning in Singapore. This case looks to examine whether Singapore's long-term planning over the years has been effective, and also explore how and why it may have fallen short.

Long-term planning in Singapore: What is it?

Long-term, forward-looking planning is firmly entrenched as an integral part of Singapore's land use development process. Singapore's Concept Plan, a strategic, long-term land use and transportation plan drawn up to guide the city-state's development over the course of 40 to 50 years, is reviewed every decade.

As its name suggests, the Concept Plan is conceptual; the finer details of precinct design, precise land-parcel configuration, zoning or even plot ratio are thus not spelt out. Rather, the Concept Plan maps out a structure for Singapore's urban development on a broad, island-wide basis. For instance, it proposes the location of future housing, commercial, industrial clusters, as well as where major infrastructure projects (e.g. the MRT Network, reservoirs) will be needed and provided. Green spaces (e.g. Nature Reserves and Nature Areas, parks and open spaces) are also safeguarded. **Exhibit 1** shows the latest Concept Plan that was published in the 2013 Land Use Plan report.

The Concept Plan process has its roots in rational planning¹⁰, where analytic thinking is used to formulate a plan that, through data analysis, modelling and forecasting, is assessed to be able to achieve set goals and objectives. A 'demand side' approach is adopted, utilising future economic growth and population estimates (see **Exhibit 2** below) to ascertain future demand for land development. These parameters are examined and revised at each subsequent review of the Concept Plan.

⁹ Example of comment on Straits Times article "High Quality of Life still possible with larger population, Khaw" Jan 31 2013: "Honestly, no point making big plans about the future when the current infrastructure, although improving at snail's pace (paid by taxpayers' monies) still leaves much to be desired" MP of Tanjong Pagar, Tin Pei Ling also highlighted a similar point in her Parliamentary White Paper speech. Source: <https://www.facebook.com/tinpeiling.official/posts/502981183077114> (cited Nov 8 2013)

¹⁰ Wong Tai Chee, "Sustainability Planning and Its Theory and Practice: An Introduction", *Spatial Planning for a Sustainable Singapore*. Pg 7