

HDB must evolve from current role: Ho Kwon Ping

Nicole Tan

Channel NewsAsia, 12 November 2014

SINGAPORE: As Singapore looks ahead to the next 50 years, one key area that needs looking into is the allocation of scarce land, said Mr Ho Kwon Ping.

Mr Ho, the Executive Chairman of Banyan Tree Holdings, is an S R Nathan Fellow for the Study of Singapore. He gave his second lecture on Wednesday (Nov 12) under the IPS-Nathan series organised by the Institute of Policy Studies at the National University of Singapore.

The Housing and Development Board (HDB) needs to evolve from its current role as a housing developer, said Mr Ho. Over the next few decades, it should focus on a new dual role - as a master land developer and regulator of housing prices.

This means setting sale-price ranges for land parcels, which are in turn auctioned off to private developers. Mr Ho says the competition will ensure design and quality, but within price ranges set by HDB.

"The competition by private developers on detailed design, quality, features and so forth, will ensure market forces dictate, but within presidential price ranges set by HDB. Not price ranges for land, but price ranges for the final product," he said.

"If we did that, all housing developments will become private. There will be a single master land developer selling parcels to private developers. There will be no more private versus public divide. Then HDB estates will be real towns, with housing of different price ranges, so as to erode the social distinctions that we still have and should not have in the next 50 years."

Innovation needed for business and labour

Mr Ho also cited other areas that must adapt to change, in order to remain relevant for the next half-century.

To remain competitive as the city-state's geographic location becomes less strategic, Singapore must create eco-systems of business activity which are so elaborately inter-related that they cannot be reconstructed by competitors, he said.

Meanwhile, to address current concerns relating to foreign labour, Mr Ho suggested innovative immigration programmes, such as converting the foreign worker levy into a deferred savings account, to be withdrawn upon the worker's permanent repatriation so as to ensure good behaviour while in Singapore.