

10m population not really a ridiculous number for S'pore to plan for: Liu Thai Ker

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SINGAPORE - Former chief city planner Liu Thai Ker on Tuesday (Jan 11) maintained that a population size of 10 million is "not really a ridiculous number" for Singapore to make plans to accommodate.

This is particularly so, given the city-state's need to ramp up economic growth to keep pace with neighbouring countries that are progressing faster than before.

The former chief executive of the Housing Board was responding to a question on whether Singapore was becoming too overcrowded, during a panel discussion that kicked off a yearly conference organised by the Institute of Policy Studies think-tank.

This is not the first time Dr Liu, who is now chairman of Morrow Architects and Planners, has floated a population figure.

A contentious topic that has provoked public uproar over the years, the 10 million figure was used by an opposition party as recently as during 2020's election to suggest - falsely - that the Government plans to increase Singapore's population by bringing in foreigners.

Dr Liu, who on Tuesday reiterated that he was no longer in the Government and was speaking in his personal capacity, has clarified that the 10 million number was always a planning parameter and not a target.

He had first written about it in 2014, as a population size to plan for so that Singapore remains sustainable in the long term - a timeline he envisioned as stretching as far ahead as 2200.

The Government has said that Singapore's population is likely to be significantly below 6.9 million by 2030 - another number that drew consternation when first published as a projection in the Population White Paper of 2013.

On Tuesday, Dr Liu pointed to Singapore being located between China, India and Indonesia - three of the largest countries in the world now making tremendous progress.

His concern was that Singapore was sinking into complacency when it in fact needs an even sharper and more distinct "crisis mentality" today than it had in its early years of independence, in order to stay on a par with or ahead of its Asian neighbours.

"We must be prepared for possibly faster economic growth to stand tall among them," said Dr Liu. "And to do so, we must accept population growth. And partly because of that, a few years ago, I said, 'Let's plan for 10 million people'.

He pointed out that Singapore had increased its population by around four million in the past 55 years.

But panel moderator and Ambassador-at-Large Chan Heng Chee, who is also a professor at the Lee Kuan Yew Centre for Innovative Cities housed within the Singapore University of Technology and Design, noted that pandemic conditions had shrunk Singapore's population by some 200,000 to 5.45 million as at June last year.

Fellow panellist George Yeo said he had some sympathy for Dr Liu's view.

"If you plan for more and we don't reach that number, then Singapore will be very spacious," the former foreign minister added. "Whereas if you plan for fewer, and because of the nature of things - not everything is within our control - the population grows more than we anticipated, then it will be very crowded."