

Protest over condo plan for forest site **Upper Bukit Timah residents raise 'green' issue**

Grace Chua

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Residents of a clutch of housing developments in Upper Bukit Timah have banded together to protest against the development of what might be taller condominiums in their neighbourhood.

Last Friday, about 50 of them from Dairy Farm, Chestnut and Cashew estates showed up for a meeting in Dairy Farm Estate to discuss the issue; and a Facebook group set up for the cause has already garnered 62 'likes'.

The focus of their concern: A 1.86ha site between Petir Road and Dairy Farm Estate, bordered by Dairy Farm Road, and the 410 condominium units the Urban Redevelopment Authority (URA) estimates can be built there.

The site, now secondary forest, is on the URA's reserve list and developers can apply for it from next month.

These residents' first concern is that if property developers bite, the development there may tower over their low-rise homes and block their verdant views.

Their second concern: the construction will harm the plant and animal life and increase surface runoff into a canal, which already fills when it rains.

A third concern: A road planned in the area will cut into a canal-side jogging trail popular with residents at dawn and dusk.

Dairy Farm Estate resident Kevin Kho, a 51-year-old engineer spearheading the community's protest, said he saw the site on the reserve list of the Government Land Sales programme in March.

If a developer offers more than the URA's reserve price for the site, it will trigger its release and open up bidding to other developers as well.

This site aside, two other developments, Foresque and Tree House - both 24 storeys tall - are also coming up farther away.

Mr Kho said such developments would overshadow homes in the area and that the clearing of the secondary forest would threaten its animal life, which includes macaques and tree snakes.

Last month, his neighbour Ong Hui Guan, 48, wrote to their Member of Parliament Vivian Balakrishnan to ask for the jogging trail along the canal to be retained and the mature trees preserved.

Dr Balakrishnan replied that he would work with the Land Transport Authority to retain the trail; he also agreed with Mr Ong's call to connect the Dairy Farm area to the Green Corridor, the strip of former railway land, and to the Nature Reserve across the Bukit Timah Expressway.

The URA, which said it has received feedback from residents, told The Straits Times in an e-mail that it would take heed of their views and work with agencies and developers to ensure that the area is developed sensitively and in line with the Master Plan.

Chestnut Ville resident Juliet Kelly-Wong, 42, when asked whether she was worried that the construction would affect her property's value, said: 'No.'

Property consultant Donald Han of the HSR Property Group said future developments there could in fact boost property values; with more people, services such as kindergartens and coffee joints will spring up.

Institute of Policy Studies senior research fellow Gillian Koh said she would hesitate to call this an instance of Nimby, or the not-in-my-backyard syndrome.

Citing the recent opposition to the building of facilities for seniors in Toh Yi as an example, she said Nimby applies when something recognised as being for the public good is at stake, blocked by people out of self-interest.

Referring to the Dairy Farm residents' cause, she said: 'We have to let them help us understand their claims better, and if they are indeed anticipating things, to invite government engagement on the use of land in their neighbourhood. That might be a good thing. But if it's clear there is no public interest at stake, they'll have even less of a case to defend in taking up the state's time.'

The residents are to meet Dr Balakrishnan on June 9 to propose that property developers in the area be required to build green roofs and to retain a buffer of greenery in the upcoming developments.

Mr Ong said: 'I don't think most of us are opposed to development here. It is the way development takes place; that it ought to take into account our views.'