

Should businesses be allowed to outbid faith groups for religious sites?

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The church near your home, or the temple by your child's school, may also be a house of death, in that it has a columbarium to hold the ashes of the dead. Chances are, many Singaporeans weren't too aware of this. Or didn't really care.

Until last month, that is.

That's when news broke that future residents of Fernvale Lea in Sengkang were upset to learn that a columbarium would be built near their new Housing Board flats.

The HDB's brochure for the Build-To-Order development shows the 2,000 sq m, 30-year leasehold site in Fernvale Link would include a Chinese temple. At the bottom of the page, a disclaimer in fine print says "places of worship may also include columbarium as an ancillary use".

It was not just this that raised eyebrows. It turned out that the winning tenderer for the site last July was a commercial, profit-focused entity - Eternal Pure Land, a subsidiary of an Australian listed company. Its hefty \$5.2 million bid beat bids by faith-based organisations of \$4 million (Taoist) and \$1.8 million (Buddhist).

Although the HDB's tender process allows anyone - including individuals, religious groups and corporate entities - to bid for a place of worship site, it is the first time a commercial entity has won such a parcel independent of any links to a religious organisation.

While some future residents worry about issues like the resale value of their flats, at a broader level, the case puts the HDB's open tender process under the spotlight, with many also questioning if commercial interests should be allowed to develop a space reserved for worship.

It also indirectly highlights issues of community access for smaller faith-based groups which rely on their own fund-raising to obtain places of worship in expensive, land-scarce Singapore.

The current situation

Faith groups, religious academics and property commentators have told *The Straits Times* that it is highly unusual for businesses to take part in tenders for religious sites, much less win a bid.

Such sites are usually contested only by faith groups. Tender records on the HDB's website dating back to 1991 show this. They also show that individual members from these faith groups - for instance, wealthy businessmen - have on occasion launched bids on the groups' behalf.

The only other time a business got involved was in 2000 - for a Chinese temple and funeral parlour site in Bedok North Avenue 4. Even then, the business, Tan Holding, did this in partnership with the Lorong Koo Chye Sheng Hong Temple Association.

The HDB and Urban Redevelopment Authority (URA) last week said Eternal Pure Land must adhere strictly to the tender conditions and preserve the intent of the site as a Chinese temple.

They added that the company had affirmed its commitment to running a Chinese temple there to serve the community.

But such an open, unfiltered bidding system means more companies can stride in, plonk down several million dollars and snap up a hotly contested site meant for religious use. This rewards groups that are big and rich, said Mr Ku Swee Yong, chief executive of real estate agency Century 21.

Easily outpricing religious groups, these businesses would also be delving into a sector already facing a severe space crunch.

Government land parcels for places of worship are rare and released only intermittently.

The URA - which decides how land is used - allocates such parcels based on population demography, distribution of existing places of worship, ease of access for the community, and any potential impact on the surroundings.

It works with agencies such as the Ministry of Culture, Community and Youth and the HDB to study the demand and provision of sites for places of worship. The Islamic Religious Council of Singapore, a statutory board which oversees 68 mosques, also works with these agencies.

These sites are then safeguarded and zoned for place of worship use in the Master Plan.

HDB acts as a land sales agent for the State and calls tenders for these sites. Government agencies work together to determine if each site is to be designated as a church, or a Chinese or Hindu temple, at the time of tender.

Only one or two such sites are released each year, usually as towns develop. That may not be enough to meet demand from religious groups: about 300 churches under the wing of the National Council of Churches of Singapore; 31 Catholic churches; over 130 temples and societies registered under the Singapore Buddhist Federation; more than 500 temples under the Taoist Federation; and about 40 Hindu temples.

As many as 11 groups might contest one site, as in the 1996 tender for a 2,500 sq m plot for a Chinese temple in Jurong West Street 76 where the Singapore Soka Association now stands. Its winning bid was \$6.3 million.

The space crunch resulting in high bids explains why smaller churches unable to get their own premises may be driven to hold services in unconventional spaces like cinemas.

The way forward

Some real estate observers said corporate and religious partnerships could be the way forward, as businesses are resource-rich and have expertise in property development.

Such an arrangement could work for cash-strapped small and medium-sized religious groups, which spend years raising funds among devotees for their expansion needs.

The 3,500-member BW Monastery in Geylang, for example, has spent five years raising funds for a four-storey temple in Woodlands Avenue 6. But the Buddhist society has so far raised only half of the \$20 million it needs by 2017.

A tie-up with a corporate body could work in other ways: Last month, the Ministry of National Development said it was exploring the idea of multi-storey hubs for related religious groups, as a way to ease the space crunch.

Some have suggested that a commercial entity could develop such a complex, and lease space to religious groups. Faith groups will not have to fork out a large sum upfront.

Experts said it could also benefit the State, which would need to work with just a single leasee.

But all 10 religious leaders The Straits Times spoke to said they would rather set their own conditions as guided by their religious doctrines than risk being dictated to by profit-hungry shareholders.

They listed several downsides to corporate and religious tie-ups, such as corporations imposing hefty rents on faith groups. There could also be a clash in beliefs and philosophies between a developer and a religious group.

Buddhism, for instance, is not about personal or financial gain, noted Reverend Guna Siri, the resident monk of the Bodhiraja Buddhist Society in Geylang.

"People go to a place of worship to pray and for their spiritual development. Devotees and the community must be at the forefront of any project," he said.

What needs to change

The open bidding system sends the message that the authorities prioritise the economic value of such transactions, but not the social and spiritual values, said political observer Eugene Tan, associate professor of law at the Singapore Management University.

He said the authorities "owe the moral responsibility" to articulate to the community why commercial entities have been allowed to come into the picture.

Sentiment on the ground and across religious quarters has been largely against the corporatisation of religion.

But this does not mean that the tender process should be restricted to allow only religious associations to place bids.

Some flexibility should still be afforded so that religious groups can continue to have the option of partnering with their own wealthy members, affiliated business arms or independent commercial entities on their own accord.

Still, tweaks should be made to the system to prevent a recurrence of the Sengkang situation, where a corporate entity enters the religious arena as a business.

This could include adding a layer of checks during the application process. For one thing, applicants should, from the get-go, submit documents establishing their links to the religious society that will eventually be located at the site. In the Sengkang case, it is still unclear which religious group will be housed in the Fernvale Link temple, alongside the planned columbarium.

Other processes should be in place to ensure that a business can profit only to a "certain degree", and that religious services continue to be accessible to the common man, said Institute of Policy Studies' senior research fellow Mathew Mathews.

Making these review processes and evaluations public could help bolster the process' transparency.

An HDB spokesman said: "While an entity can choose to bid for a place of worship site, whether it would be successful or not is a different matter... as the bids are subject to evaluation."

SLP International's Mr Nicholas Mak suggested including places of worship sites that are up for tender in the Government Land Sales programme on URA's website. The GLS list, published twice a year, details residential, commercial, hotel, and mixed use land parcels that will be up for sale in the next six months.

Putting religious sites into the mix will give residents a holistic overview of the different developments coming up in their neighbourhoods. "This is crucial, as there will be greater scrutiny of land transactions from here on as we put more users with different land needs within the same square metre," said Mr Mak.

Instead of letting a one-off incident set a precedent, the Sengkang case has presented an opportunity for the system to be reviewed even as the tussle for space intensifies. It is also a chance for groups across faith circles to put their heads together and work with the authorities to develop new land-use models that can better address their needs.

If that is the outcome, the Fernvale columbarium saga would then prove to be more than a storm in a teacup. It would have lasting impact - not only on the dead, but also very much on the living.