

## S'pore has to plan for more flexibility in the city: Desmond Lee

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Singapore faces foreseeable challenges such as climate change and the possible fragmentation of society, as well as unpredictable challenges like future pandemics in the years ahead, and will need to plan for greater flexibility in the city, said Minister for National Development Desmond Lee.

This may mean safeguarding more land for future use instead of maximising all the available resources now, and would require balancing competing interests across time and space.

In such situations where there are no perfect solutions and people must make tough compromises, Singaporeans will need to trust that decisions made are in their best shared interests after all the different views have been heard, he said at the Institute of Policy Studies' Singapore Perspectives 2022 conference yesterday.

It was held at the Sands Expo and Convention Centre at Marina Bay Sands and streamed online.

Mr Lee was describing what Singapore might look like in future, and he said trust, stewardship and collective action were essential elements to achieve this vision.

As a city state, Singapore must fit everything that a sovereign country needs within its 730 sq km. "This is our burden to bear, but it is also our calling and our opportunity - and it pushes us to keep finding better ways to make the most of what we have," he said.

Thus, city planning is not just a technical, professional or infrastructural process, he added, "it is a sociopolitical process - it is about nurturing our society and becoming the nation that we aspire to be".

To this end, Singapore has started to prepare for uncertainties that could arise from climate change, societal polarisation, population ageing, city maintenance and land-use pressures, he said.

For instance, the country has committed to raise its land and construct sea walls and polders to keep out the sea in a major investment and "act of faith" that could cost some \$100 billion or more over the next 50 or 100 years, he said.

With societies around the world becoming more polarised along race, religion, socioeconomic status or political ideologies, Singapore has also put in place measures to encourage interaction among different groups, such as launching a new model for public housing in prime locations that also includes public rental flats, he added.

Meanwhile, as the population ages, the Housing Board (HDB) has started to pilot a new type of flat that integrates senior-friendly housing with care services, communal spaces and programmes so seniors can age in place.

Singapore is also working hard to guard against urban decay, said Mr Lee. He noted that older cities have learnt hard lessons when neglected roads and highways gave rise to more accidents, and buildings in disrepair became safety hazards.

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### **Why rental, sold flats are mixed**

When policymakers were mulling over whether to include rental flats in new projects under the prime location housing model, there were some who strongly advised against doing so, said National Development Minister Desmond Lee.

But he noted that providing amenities for people to share and use together can enable those of different socio-economic statuses to mix and intermingle. "My belief is that will provide the kind of social discourse that we really need to foster proactively in a society where you might see social economic divide beginning to strain and pull apart (communities)," he said at a panel discussion yesterday at the Singapore Perspectives 2022 forum organised by the Institute of Policy Studies.

Mr Lee was responding to a question on how to ensure mixing rental flats with sold flats would have their intended effect of uplifting those of a lower income and encouraging integration.

He added that there are some who believe separating those living in rental housing from the rest of the community would lead to the gentrification of certain areas in Singapore, and leave those of lower incomes in a downward spiral.

However, there are also concerns about putting those living in rental flats "in the company of people they perceive as being more successful", he noted. "Will it be a plus? Will it motivate them? Will it demotivate them? Will it be a fraught experience? I think time will tell," said Mr Lee.

Recounting his experiences of visiting estates where rental flats and sold flats are co-located, Mr Lee said residents had a mixed experience.

"It is not all one way - not everyone welcomes it. But people also recognise that this is important for social mixing," he said, adding that some had also cautioned against mixing rental and sold flats in the prime location housing model.

He said experts, such as sociologists and social workers, advise that infrastructure is just one enabling piece for integration.

"So, just living with people who may be of a different socio-economic status than you - that is infrastructure design. But you programme it well, you enable people to mix and intermingle."

## **Ng Keng Gene**

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To avoid this, Singapore will upgrade HDB flats as they age, with two rounds of the Home Improvement Programme for each flat, once when the flat is 30 years old, and another when it is about 60 to 70 years old.

Mr Lee also pledged to refresh older buildings and keep them in good condition so that "the future of our city remains connected with our past, with our memories".

He also noted the pressures on land use, with the need for more housing space as society's aspirations evolve.

He said demand for housing has risen, partly because children of the baby boomers, born in the 80s and 90s, are starting their own families, and partly because of changes in social structures and aspirations that have led to smaller households and children preferring to strike out on their own.

There is also a need to prepare for "unknown unknowns", such as crises like the Covid-19 pandemic, he said. This means planning for flexibility and different possibilities, including setting aside more land to stockpile and produce essential materials during supply disruptions.

"This may mean that we can't maximise all our available land now, but it will help us to build resilience for future challenges," he said.

Sketching out a future Singapore that is diverse and inclusive, and where the city is in harmony with nature, Mr Lee said trust, stewardship and collective action are necessary to achieve this vision.

"Trust doesn't mean we always have to agree, but it means we must believe that despite our disagreements, we always have the interests of our city at heart," he said, noting that this comes with building deep relationships over time.

Next, it is critical to steward Singapore's limited land with care as the country's forefathers did for the current generation, he said.

"This means thinking long term, because our city is not just for us, but for our children and their children to come," added Mr Lee, pointing to how earlier generations had set aside swathes of land now being used for urban transformation plans such as the Greater Southern Waterfront.

"As these plans are realised, they will create new and interesting spaces for the next generation - who will, in turn, pursue their own rejuvenation plans and shape this city in the vision that they aspire."

Lastly, Mr Lee urged Singaporeans to take collective action. "All of us have a part to play in the future for our society and city state," he said.