

## **Trust, stewardship and collective action necessary to build future Singapore, says Desmond Lee**

**Tham Yuen-C**

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SINGAPORE - 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 added at the Institute of Policy Studies' Singapore Perspectives 2022 conference on Monday (Jan 24).

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

Mr Lee was sharing his vision of what Singapore might look like in the years ahead and what is needed for the country to get there. Trust was one of the elements he highlighted, alongside stewardship and collective action.

As a city state, and the only one worldwide that is responsible for defence, foreign affairs and other aspects associated with full sovereignty, Singapore must fit everything that a sovereign country needs within its city limits of 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 of Singapore's intense land-use pressures.

Thus, city planning is not just a technical, professional or infrastructural process, he added, "it is a sociopolitical process - it's 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 people of different backgrounds, 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.

Amid these developments, the city will also grow old, and Singapore is 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 and hot spots for crime.

To avoid this, Singapore will upgrade HDB flats as they age to keep them in good condition, 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 keep in good condition and refresh older buildings that form important parts of the collective heritage, saying: "This way, 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 the society's aspirations evolve.

He pointed to how demand for housing has risen recently, 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.

Aside from these uncertainties, there is also a need to prepare for "unknown unknowns", such as crises like the Covid-19 pandemic, he said, referring to unpredictable risks.

This will require planning for different possibilities and greater flexibility, including safeguarding more land to stockpile and produce essential materials during supply disruptions and setting aside flexible "white space" for emergency use.

"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 close-knit, climate-ready, celebrates diversity, makes space for differences and brings people together in common spaces, Mr Lee said trust, stewardship and collective action are necessary to achieve this vision.

On trust, he said: "When we share our views, do we trust that we will be heard? Do we trust that those who disagree with us love this city as much as we do, so that we can try to find common ground?"

He added: "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. Fostering this takes hard work, there'll be stumbles along the way, and it only comes with building deep relationships over time."

Next, with land so scarce, it is critical to steward it with care as Singapore'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 that are being used for bold urban transformation plans such as the Greater Southern Waterfront, the Jurong Lake District, and the Paya Lebar Air Base when it is relocated.

"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 called on Singaporeans to take collective action, "roll up our sleeves, and work together".

"All of us have a part to play in the future for our society and city state," he said. "We only have one city, and we must make the most of it now and in the future."