

"Business as usual" for Sitoh Yih Pin

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He may not be a visible fixture in the Potong Pasir district these days, but Mr Sitoh Yih Pin, the People's Action Party (PAP) branch manager and grassroots adviser working in the Opposition stronghold, insists "it's business as usual".

The 45-year-old accountant — who debuted in the 2001 General Election — admits the days of "mega events" where he and his grassroots volunteers would organise events which pulled in residents in their thousands are long gone.

"Post-2006, our grassroots have decentralised our efforts ... so that there is more bonding (with residents) and more personal outreach," Mr Sitoh told MediaCorp on Tuesday.

He did not give more details, but said "our Residents' Committees have won three star awards from the People's Association recently ... so this is evidence our volunteers are still putting in effort, it's just that we are not visible".

During the interview, Mr Sitoh said he was now focusing on a "personal touch" which he hopes will win over the residents.

What does he think of news that the incumbent in Potong Pasir, 74-year-old Chiam See Tong, might be leaving his Potong Pasir seat in the next election, possibly to lead a team to contest in the Bishan-Toa Payoh GRC in the next General Election, which is due by February 2012?

"Our activists will continue to fight" was his reply.

These days, Mr Sitoh says he meets residents regularly at community events which are low-key affairs "attended by 100 to 200 people".

This pales in comparison to the days when he and his team attracted 8,000 residents for a food festival in 2004.

And while the residents are unlikely to see the famous \$2 shark's fin soup and abalone porridge dished out at community events in the past, Mr Sitoh says the people of Potong Pasir are still getting his full attention.

Before the last election in 2006, Mr Sitoh had also installed solar lamps along the path where the covered walkway linking the Potong Pasir MRT station and the town centre is now, after leasing the land from the Singapore Land Authority (SLA).

But after his defeat at the polls, he declined to repair them after they were vandalised, saying that the land's lease was due to expire. The more subdued engagement hasn't escaped the notice of some residents here.

"Mr Chiam has been doing a good job here but what I'm really surprised about is the lack of engagement from the PAP. You rarely see Sitoh," noted retiree George Lu, 76.

He also said that unlike Mr Chiam, Mr Sitoh did not hold regular meet—the—people sessions, which were discontinued after the latter's 2006 defeat. When told about these views, Mr Sitoh denied that he had abandoned Potong Pasir.

"Our grassroots leaders are still active and as far as the PAP is concerned, you can be sure that we will fight the next battle ... we have fought the last 25 years in Potong Pasir and will continue fighting".

Despite speculation, analysts say it is unrealistic for the ruling party to "abandon" Potong Pasir.

"It is simply not a practical approach to national politics and ... it will eventually have a blowback effect as many PAP supporters and government employees are also Potong Pasir residents," said Associate Professor Bilveer Singh, a political scientist from the National University of Singapore (NUS).

While residents may be pleased with Mr Chiam's performance, Assoc Prof Singh said that there was no guarantee that the veteran MP's track record will be sufficient to make Potong Pasir a no-go constituency for the PAP.

"The PAP has been explicit about their Potong Pasir strategy but with the Potong Pasir MRT station now open ... that also shows that there are also limits as residents cannot be cut off from national programmes," observed Dr Gillian Koh, a senior research fellow at the Institute of Policy Studies.

But will the PAP be upping the stakes now that Mr Chiam has signalled he might leave?

"Whether he contests or not, there will likely be continuity on the opposition's side," she said, referring to talk that Mr Chiam's wife Lina Loh Woon See is gunning for his seat.

"We will have wait and see if the PAP will adopt a different strategy (when that is announced)".