

By-election will be barometer of Govt's performance: WP

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A few days after Deputy Prime Minister Teo Chee Hean said Punggol East residents are most concerned about municipal issues such as transport and childcare facilities, the Workers' Party Chairman Sylvia Lim yesterday tried to raise the stakes by framing the coming by-election as a potential "barometer" of how Singaporeans feel about the Government's performance since the 2011 General Election.

The Singapore Democratic Party (SDP) also threw its hat in the ring, hours after the WP formally rebuffed its overtures by unveiling Ms Lee Li Lian - who had contested in Punggol East in the 2011 GE - as its candidate.

The SDP is set to announce its candidate in a press conference today, after its party leadership held a 2.5-hour pow-wow to select a candidate.

SDP Secretary-General Chee Soon Juan was tight-lipped on the candidate's identity but it is likely to be between infectious diseases expert Paul Tambyah and SDP Treasurer Vincent Wijesingha. A third possible candidate, Dr Ang Yong Guan, ruled himself out of the running when contacted by TODAY.

Among the trio, only Dr Wijesingha attended the SDP meeting yesterday. Dr Tambyah nevertheless told this newspaper that he will be at the SDP press conference today.

Dr Chee told reporters that the party "knew all along" that it will have to enter the fray on its own. "We knew that all along, we are going to just have to do it, do whatever we have decided," said Dr Chee.

At the WP press conference, Ms Lim declined to comment on the SDP's proposal to field a joint candidate. Nevertheless, she reiterated the significance of the by-election. It "probably has some bearing not just on the Punggol East constituency, but on Singaporeans in general", said Ms Lim,

"I believe the Government is watching the outcome of this election because in some way, it will also be an indicator of the people's feelings towards what has transpired since the last GE," she added.

Ms Lee, 34, said that the 41 per cent of Punggol East residents who had voted for her in GE 2011 - former People's Action Party MP Michael Palmer won with 54.5 per cent of votes - had given her the confidence to stand again.

Ms Lim said the party took some time to deliberate on which candidate to field - Non-Constituency MPs Gerald Giam and Yee Jenn Jong were also said to be in the running - but

"we believe we are not short-changing Li Lian or the residents because they already know her from previously".

Ms Lim added: "On a personal note, I certainly look forward to the prospect of having more elected women in the House."

Institute of Policy Studies senior research fellow Gillian Koh said if Ms Lee wins the by-election, the WP will have an additional representative in Parliament, "instead of a duplication" had either of its NCMPs been fielded, said Dr Koh.

Nominated MP Eugene Tan said WP's move to give women a bigger voice in Parliament would resonate with Singaporeans. Sticking with the same candidate as in GE 2011 would also be a message to voters to keep faith with the party, he said.

Asked about Ms Lim's framing of the Punggol East by-election as one with bearing on Singaporeans in general, East Asian Institute Senior Research Fellow Lam Peng Er said in a country like Singapore with one layer of government, it is "not so clear cut what is a national issue and what is a local issue".

Should more Opposition parties enter the fray, there could be more airing of national issues given their lack of understanding of municipal issues, he said. But Dr Lam said the WP's style is to "keep their nose close to the ground", and noted that its Hougang by-election campaign was not run on national issues alone.