

Marsiling-Yew Tee, Jalan Besar town councils launched

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Two new town councils have been formed following the recent General Election (GE).

These include the Jalan Besar Town Council which, with effect from yesterday, took over the management of the areas under the now-defunct Potong Pasir Town Council, as well as parts of the estates previously looked after by the Moulmein-Kallang Town Council, which has also been dissolved.

The move caught the eye of political observers and reinforced their belief that Potong Pasir — the smallest Single-Member Constituency (SMC) and an Opposition stronghold before the People's Action Party (PAP) wrested it back in 2011 — could be absorbed into a Group Representation Constituency (GRC) in the next GE. Nevertheless, they added that it was too early to tell while noting that it is a matter of time before Potong Pasir is merged with a GRC, as keeping it as an SMC all these years has been an anomaly.

The changes were announced yesterday by the Ministry of National Development, which said that the town councils had been formed “at the request of the respective Members of Parliament (MPs)”.

From December, the other new town council, Marsiling-Yew Tee Town Council, will take over management of the areas in Marsiling-Yew Tee GRC, which were previously managed by the town councils of Chua Chu Kang and Sembawang.

In all, there will be 16 town councils, unchanged from the number previously. Among these, 13 will be reconstituted based on the new electoral boundaries. Only Tampines Town Council remains intact, with the area it is looking after unchanged.

Potong Pasir MP Sitoh Yih Pin, in response to queries, said Potong Pasir is joining Jalan Besar Town Council to get “good economies of scale”.

Pointing out that the former Potong Pasir Town Council is 10 per cent the size of a typical People's Action Party (PAP) town council, he said: “Jalan Besar is a natural partner, it is our direct neighbour.” He added both town councils share the same Service & Conservancy Charges and Managing Agent, EM Services, since 2011.

On the possibility of Potong Pasir being absorbed into a GRC in the next GE, Mr Sitoh said: “That's not up to me. But personally, I would prefer Potong Pasir to remain as an SMC. I have repeatedly said so.”

Mrs Lina Chiam, who under the Singapore People's Party banner lost to Mr Sitoh in the last two elections, said there is probably more bureaucracy involved in a larger town council, and said: “Can the PAP (managing agent) ensure Potong Pasir's welfare and kampung spirit remain intact?”

Mrs Chiam, whose husband Chiam See Tong held Potong Pasir for 27 years, acknowledged the possibility that Potong Pasir could be merged into Jalan Besar GRC in the next electoral boundaries review and said she has to prepare a team for a “harder fight”.

Political analysts interviewed said the small number of voters in Potong Pasir, coupled with the PAP cementing its base in Potong Pasir, paved the way for the SMC to be part of a GRC.

National University of Singapore political scientist Bilveer Singh pointed out that the four-member Jalan Besar GRC and Potong Pasir SMC together have around 114,000 voters, which would make them smaller than the current five-member GRCs. He felt the SMC would probably be absorbed into a GRC, but it would also depend on how boundaries are redrawn for other neighbouring GRCs, which would be the best fit for Potong Pasir.

Singapore Management University law don Eugene Tan said Potong Pasir's SMC status has long been an "anomaly", which has remained "because previous EBRCs (Electoral Boundaries Review Committees) had been mindful that any redrawing of a long-time Opposition-held ward would result in accusations of gerrymandering". He also noted that the name of one of Singapore's oldest town councils has been consigned to history.

Institute of Policy Studies senior research fellow Gillian Koh said that Potong Pasir is now "decisively in the PAP fold" in the wake of the swing towards the PAP — Mr Sitoh took 66.39 per cent of the vote. But it will be up to Mr Sitoh to prove that the estate will be better maintained with minimal cost or no cost increases under the management of a larger town council.

Meanwhile, the sole Workers' Party (WP)-run town council will be renamed Aljunied-Hougang Town Council, after the party's defeat in Punggol East. Aljunied GRC MP Pritam Singh will replace Ms Sylvia Lim as chairman of the town council.

Pasir Ris-Punggol Town Council chairman Zainal Sapari said they have requested for official documents from the WP and applied to the Housing and Development Board to takeover the Punggol East town council site office.