

HDB chief refuses to answer question on urban planning principle behind higher population density

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What is the urban planning principle behind the higher population density plans? [HDB](#) chief today chose not to answer that question. Recently, a letter writer to The Straits Times expressed alarm at the population figures presented by Housing & Development Board (HDB) chief executive Dr Cheong Koon Hean. In her 2nd IPS-Nathan lecture, Dr Cheong said that Singapore's population density would increase from 11,000 people per sq km to 13,700 people per sq km between now and 2030.

The letter writer, Cheang Peng Wah, pointing to Singapore's land area which is 720 sq km, expressed his unease that Singapore's population size could go up to 9,864,000, or nearly 10 million, by 2030. He said that this was not the figure projected in the Population White Paper of 2013. The White Paper had projected a population of 6.9 million by 2030.

At Dr Cheong's 3rd IPS lecture today, I asked her the following question as a representative of iCompareLoan:

"In the last lecture you mentioned that Singapore's population density will increase in the future. I can understand and appreciate that your views on urban planning are based on your role as a planner – not policy maker. But planners too don't plan in a vacuum. My question is, "what underlying principles/philosophies guide your planning process.""

The question and answer session was moderated by Professor Lily Kong, Provost of the Singapore Management University. Because of the brevity of time for the Q&A session, Prof Kong suggested that a few questions be asked before Dr Cheong answers them. There were several other questions – including questions from former Minister of State for the Ministry of Foreign Affairs Zainul Abidin, an RGS student, a representative from an NGO, and a property agent.

When the time came for Dr Cheong to answer the questions which were asked, she first remarked that she had the right to answer whichever questions she wanted to. She then went ahead to answer all the questions, except the question by the property agent (whose question was about the HDB flat prices which has increased over the generations and is now viewed as a "ticking time bomb") and mine.

At the end of the lecture as I was leaving the venue of the lecture, another participant (who was a total stranger to me) stopped me at the hallway and remarked with a wry smile: "she didn't answer you did she? It was an important question."

I agree with him that it was an important question, which the HDB chief should have considered answering.

Urban planning is often described not only as a technical process, but also as a political one, which is concerned with the development and use of land protection and use of the environment, public welfare and the design of urban environment, including air, water and the

infrastructure passing into and out of urban areas such as transportation, communication and distribution network.

So if the philosophy behind the politics is (for example) defined as, “unless Singaporeans suddenly start having radically larger families, the only logical answer is, the country needs to dramatically increase its immigration levels – perhaps even double them,” then urban planning will follow suit, and build more for a larger population.

The urban planners in HDB are indeed guided by prevailing political philosophies such as the Ethnic Integration Policy, Permanent Resident Quota policy, car-free town centre, etc. HDB has a clearly stated pricing principle – “to keep homes within the reach of the majority of flat buyers”, but besides the overarching policy principle of “universal home-ownership”, it does not seem to have an urban planning principle.

Besides, Dr Cheong is not the first planner to suggest a 10 million population for Singapore. Her predecessor, Dr Liu Thai Ker, also suggested that figure.