

Rising costs worry residents

Concerns raised by Punggol East residents also include amenities and transport as they decide on a new MP

Koh Mui Theng

The New Paper, 19 January 2013

Depending on the candidate you speak to, it's either democracy that needs fixing or Rivervale Plaza.

Reform Party's (RP) Kenneth Jeyaretnam and Workers' Party (WP) Lee Li Lian have indicated they will be campaigning on national issues.

But Dr Koh Poh Koon of the People's Action Party (PAP) and Mr Desmond Lim of the Singapore Democratic Alliance (SDA) are focusing on municipal issues.

What's on the minds of the Punggol East residents?

The New Paper interviewed residents last week to get a sense of the hot-button issues in the ward. Engineer Sham Mohd Noor, like many of the 122 residents interviewed, said cost of living is No.1.

"The cost of living is getting very high, even transport (fares) are going up. Everything goes up, but never comes down," he lamented.

But Mr Sham said that doesn't mean ruling out local issues too.

"Both national and municipal issues are important. What happens on the national level, for example, living costs, will affect my family expenses.

"Immediate issues like neighbours' noise also affect our environment. So all issues, whether national or municipal, have to be addressed," he added.

Be they national or local, the lines are blurred, said political commentator Eugene Tan. After all, broad national issues have very local effects.

"Things like rising costs of living are very real. The impact of higher grocery prices and electricity bills is more immediate and people feel the pinch."

Added Prof Tan, a Nominated MP and Singapore Management University law lecturer: "When you're in the sandwiched group that's aspiring to move up the socio-economic ladder and are ineligible for financial assistance that the bottom 20 per cent get, you'll feel it."

Types of homes

Six in 10 homes in the ward comprise five-room and executive HDB flats, as well as private apartments.

Most of the flats today were built after the PAP's General Election win in 1997, The Straits Times reported.

Punggol East was part of the Pasir Ris-Punggol Group Representation Constituency before the 2011 General Election.

Real estate prices in the young estate have gone up since then as demand rises.

A four-room build-to-order flat sold for around \$250,000 in the early days, said Mr Lee Sze Teck, senior manager for training, research and consultancy at property firm Dennis Wee Group.

In the last quarter of last year, the transacted price for a four-room resale flat was between \$400,000 and \$500,000, an increase that "is in line with HDB resale price index change", he added.

Private home owners have also seen quite a "substantial price increase" for their property, said Mr Alan Cheong, senior director of research and consultancy at Savills Singapore.

The average transaction was between \$600 and \$700 psf five years ago. Today, property near the MRT station can command up to \$1,000 psf, while those further away fetch about \$850 psf.

Mr Sham lives in a five-room Rivervale flat with his wife, a designer, and three girls. The family has a maid.

He bought the flat for about \$250,000 in 1998. But Mr Sham has no plans of cashing in on his profitable real estate.

He said: "I'm comfortable living here. My workplace and my daughter's school are nearby. I also don't want to take up a loan (to service the purchase of a new flat)."

Still, he feels squeezed by rising prices.

Mr Sham and his wife, a dual-income couple, spend at least \$3,000 on essentials like food, transport and education. That's a quarter of their \$12,000 monthly income.

Resident S. Toh, who is in her 50s, took issue with high health-care costs. The mother of four said she ended up paying \$150 when her three children suffered gastric flu in November.

Dusty

Clinic assistant Pauline Jee, 41, was upset at Rivervale Plaza's slow upgrading works.

"The construction is taking so long and it makes the whole area very dusty. As a result, my mother-in-law doesn't want to go to the market there any more," the mother of three said.

On Sunday, Dr Poh said upgrading works at the plaza will be ramped up after Chinese New Year.

Madam Jee also pointed to the lack of amenities like education centres and playgroups for young children.

PAP's Dr Koh and RP's Mr Jeyaretnam have said they would raise these concerns.

Calling the electorate more educated, more vocal and more demanding, Prof Tan said voters would be on the lookout for viable alternatives, "regardless of whether it's the ruling party or opposition".

Added Institute of Policy Studies' senior research fellow Gillian Koh: "As a voter, I would be looking for political leaders with courage.

"They need to explain how the different challenges listed play out against each other, and how there just aren't easy answers that fix all of them at the same time."

Mr Sham and the 31,000-plus voters in Punggol East will make their opinions known when they go to the polls on Jan 26.