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Estate upgrades: Big lift at the polls?

Four of the 14 town councils led by People's Action Party MPs recently rolled out five-year plans to transform their estates. More are set to do so. Is this a bid to sweeten the ground ahead of the General Election and will it go down well with residents? Lynn Lee finds out.

MADAM H. Suhaimi has grown to like the exercise of climbing up or down the two flights of stairs to get from her seventh floor flat to the lift.

But it is a different story for her mother, Madam Sapiah. She is 73 and has trouble walking.

'If she wants to go out, she has to wait till my sisters or brother are home, so that they can hold her, and help her down the stairs,' says the 53-year-old daughter, a senior accounts assistant.

But Madam Sapiah could soon find it easier to move around.

Her HDB block, one of the older ones, may be among the 200 that the Tampines Town Council has earmarked for upgraded lifts that stop on every floor.

It will spend \$200 million in the next five years on the project.

Yet another coveted wish of Madam Suhaimi could come true: covered linkways and ramps with hand rails. 'So I won't get wet when it rains. The hand rails will also help my mother with her walking,' she says.

Convenience is the hallmark of these improvements mapped out in the five-year estate renewal plans that four PAP town councils rolled out in the past two months.

Overall, they will spend over \$1.5 billion on these makeovers.

Mr Chew Heng Ching, an MP for East Coast GRC, calls them 'improvements and changes to the estates which are in tune with the times'.

He probably means being up-to-date, but observers see another meaning to 'the times' - they indicate that a General Election is around the corner.

Why else would such goodies be doled out, if not to sweeten the ground, they ask.

What goes into the crafting and delivering of these five-year plans and will they work in making residents more appreciative of their MPs? Will it count at the polls?

The promises

ESTATE improvements are often the centrepiece of the promise that MPs make to residents to improve their lives.

They became a key plank in the People's Action Party's (PAP) strategy to win over voters from about

the 1991 General Election. That was when the Government recognised that HDB estates had to undergo renewal to prevent them from deteriorating into slums and urban ghettos with time and neglect.

The Government introduced the Main Upgrading Programmes (MUPs) and Interim Upgrading Programmes (IUPs) and, in the process, told voters that wards that supported the PAP would get upgrading first, all things being equal.

Estate renewal plans follow along the same lines of these programmes and take in other extras that residents may want, such as fitness parks or car porches.

They are also meant to realise the dream of Singapore becoming a thriving global city everyone can call home. When Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong sketched out this vision in his National Day Rally speech, he said its realisation must begin in the heartland.

'We will start with the HDB estates', he said, 'because this is where our people live and where we want to keep the living environment first class and up-to-date.'

Just which estate gets first go at a facelift depends on its age. But Mr Lee promised that new towns will not miss out on the many goodies, too.

So, who foots the bill? For the most part, it is the Government but there is an element of co-payment for some items.

This time around, the budgets are bigger than in previous five-year plans.

Leading the pack is Sembawang Town Council, which plans to spend \$570 million. Close on its heels is East Coast (\$500 million), followed by Tampines (\$332 million) and then Aljunied (\$160 million), which was the first to unveil its plans in October.

Altogether, these town councils manage 25 wards with more than 264,000 HDB homes.

Coming up are Jalan Besar (five wards, over 55,000 HDB homes), West Coast-Ayer Rajah (six wards, over 69,000 homes) and Ang Mo Kio (six wards, over 75,000 homes).

If, in previous plans, a central feature was a space-adding item like an extra toilet or a room, the current 'hot' item seems to be lifts that stop on every floor, not a surprising demand given the rapidly ageing population.

So, lifts are taking up the lion's share of the budgets. East Coast and Tampines plan to spend \$200 million each while Sembawang is likely to spend \$336 million.

Other items popular with residents include sprucing up neighbourhood parks and playgrounds and car porches at void decks.

Popular too are security cameras at lift landings or crime-prone areas for a safer neighbourhood.

To find out what residents want, town councils conduct feedback exercises and also consult

grassroots leaders and merchants' associations. They also have to do their sums as some of the spending has to come from council funds.

Most take between a few months and a year to draw up the plans. They confess they do look around to see what others are up to, but claim there is no attempt to outdo the other wards.

As Tampines GRC MP Ong Kian Min says: 'We are conscious of our budget, we don't want something that's just cosmetic and neither do we think of topping the amounts other town councils are spending.'

Most MPs consider it their most ambitious project and take it so seriously that some even go overseas for ideas.

At Aljunied Town Council, MP Cynthia Phua is on a quest to put some sparkle into the 'jewels' of Aljunied GRC.

That is a word the council's chairman has coined to describe the parks, open spaces and grassy areas, where the 250,000 or so residents in the five wards can lead active lifestyles, and bond with community and family.

'To me, lying on the grass with the kids playing football is something that I always conjure up as being an ideal family outing and it's a joy,' she says.

Some \$13 million is being set aside for neighbourhood development and parks upgrading.

Over at Sembawang Town Council, three new parks will be built to the tune of \$4 million.

East Coast Town Council will spend about \$150 million on, among other things, making neighbourhood centres like Changi Village and Bedok Town Centre more pedestrian-friendly to encourage street life.

The precedents

SO FAR, MPs have been coy about whether their estate renewal plans are linked to the General Election being round the corner.

If it happens, it is serendipity, not strategy, they seem to be saying. But Insight's checks found that the calendar for the rolling out of estate renewal plans has tended to be just slightly ahead of when polls are called.

In the 1991 GE, held on Aug 31, at least six town councils - Redhill, Bukit Batok, Eunos, and three in Ang Mo Kio - had rolled out their five-year upgrading programmes by May that year.

Similarly, in the months leading up to the Jan 2, 1997 GE, there was a rash of estate renewal plans just before the polls.

A \$1.4 billion 10-year plan was launched in August 1996 to give Bedok GRC a new lease of

life. On Dec 22, a day before Nomination Day, Pasir Ris residents got a windfall when they were told that their estate would be improved at a cost of some \$20 million, and that their town would be the 'model' for five- to 10-year-old HDB estates set to be upgraded over the next few years.

History seems to be repeating itself as Singapore inches closer to its 10th General Election since independence. PM Lee has until June 2007 to call for one, but could call for polls well before that.

Asked last week if estate renewal was an election carrot, National Development Minister Mah Bow Tan, who unveiled Tampines Town Council's plans, would only say: 'I suppose it's a fair question, but the main point I want to emphasise is that the upgrading programme is a major platform promise of the Government and we have made this promise every election, not just this coming one.

'The important thing is that we fulfil this commitment.'

The polls

COYNESS aside, the facts are that the PAP has relied on estate upgrading as an election carrot and, going by the results since 1997, there is every reason to believe it has contributed to its success. Even if detractors argue otherwise, they must concede that upgrading has not cost the PAP votes.

Will the coming GE reap a similar harvest?

Interviews with residents in the town councils that have unveiled their plans drew a divided picture - one cast along generational lines.

One one side are younger people like sales engineer Benson Teh, 35, who are quite unmoved. He lives in Block 213, Bedok North Street 1 with his wife and two children in a block slated to get lifts that stop at every floor. His estate will also get more covered linkways and recreational facilities.

Mr Teh says: 'Something like this probably won't make a difference to me. It's a small thing. What's more important is how the country is run on a day-to-day basis.'

Mr Suresh Kumar, 33, a safety officer who lives in Woodlands, part of Sembawang GRC, also feels these plans do not 'carry much weight' for him.

'I don't see linkways and better bus-stop shelters as essential. There are other more critical issues, like medical care, that I'm concerned about.'

But tell that to older Singaporeans, like Madam Suhaimi. She says: 'There's nothing I can do if my block is not upgraded. But if it is, then of course I'll think my MP is doing a good job, and I'll be happy to support him again.'

To Hougang resident Yeo Thai Kwang, 66, better facilities would be an incentive to root for his MP, but only if 'it doesn't cost me too much money'.

Even as younger Singaporeans adopt a wait-and-see attitude, opposition members are unhappy. The opposition is hemmed in, says veteran Potong Pasir MP Chiam See Tong, because it cannot dip into the same funds as the PAP Government.

The Workers' Party's first vice-chairman, Dr Tan Bin Seng, who heads a committee that works the ground in the East Coast GRC and Joo Chiat areas, says that announcing estate renewal plans so close to the GE 'inevitably sways the less discerning voters'.

This will be hard to top, admits Mr Chiam, especially when the PAP is throwing in the 'lifts on every floor' as the package deal.

'These are high on the priorities of town councils. Of course, the electorate will judge an MP by what he can deliver, lifts included. Otherwise, how can they vote you in?' he tells Insight.

It is no surprise the younger demographic places less weight on material issues, like upgrading, says Institute of Policy Studies researcher Jeanne Conceicao.

'As Singaporeans move up the income and education ladder, expectations and needs change so that less material and tangible deliverables, like free speech and freedom of expression for example, are given greater weightage.'

But Ms Conceicao, who studies politics and governance here, predicts that estate renewal will feature prominently in the coming election.

'After all, Singaporeans have been biting the bait all this while. The incumbents would have done their groundwork before launching such projects. And it is what the people want.'

Who pays for what

MONEY for improvements comes from the Government, the town council and residents.

The Government pays the most. For the Main Upgrading Programme (MUP), which the HDB offers only to older estates, the Government pays as much as 93 per cent of the cost for first-timers. The MUP improves the neighbourhood and blocks of flats in older estates, as well as the space in each flat.

The Government also carries a substantial part of the cost for the Lift Upgrading Programme.

Before these programmes can be implemented, residents must vote for them as they have to pay for part of the cost. The payment increases with flat size.

When HDB estates want such improvements as covered linkways, playgrounds, parks and fitness corners, their grassroots leaders can apply for funds from the Community

Improvement Projects Committee (CIPC), which reports directly to the Minister for National Development.

Usually, the town councils top up the CIPC contribution with some of their surplus funds, built up over the years from service and conservancy charges, and government grants.

The Interim Upgrading Programme, which spruces up the estate less extensively than the MUP, is fully paid for by the Government and town council.

Send your views

DO YOU think estate renewal plans are a bid to sweeten the ground for the General Election?

Would you be more appreciative of your MP if your estate was upgraded? Would it influence the way you vote? What if your MP cannot promise you such plans, but pledges to fight for you on other issues?

Tell us what you think. E-mail <mailto:%20stpol@sph.com.sg> or SMS 9827-7514. For SMS messages, type stpol, followed by a space, your message and full name.