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## **Concessionary travel pass for needy families?**

**That will be one of the suggestions from GPC chiefs to help the poor and old during Budget debate**

**By Tee Hun Ching and Peh Shing Huei**

AS A poor student in London, season travel passes shaved his transport costs and allowed Mr Ong Kian Min to visit places of interest that he would otherwise not have been able to.

Now, the Tampines GRC MP and chairman of the Government Parliamentary Committee (GPC) for Transport wants a similar scheme in place for low-income families here.

He will suggest this during the debate on this year's Budget, which kicks off today and is slated to wrap up on March 9.

A concessionary season ticket, he argues, will allow the poor to travel further, especially for work. A low-income resident from Tampines, he says, should not be put off from taking a job in Tuas just because the cost of getting to and from his workplace is prohibitive.

The plight of the old and the poor looks set to get a good airing again this year, after various MPs pressed the Government to provide more assistance to these two groups at last year's sitting.

At least six of the 10 MPs who chair the various GPCs told The Straits Times they will lobby for measures to improve the lot of these groups.

It ties in with the focus of Prime Minister and Finance Minister Lee Hsien Loong's Budget speech on Feb 17, in which he gave special attention to older and needy Singaporeans.

In that speech, he announced giveaways such as a Workfare Bonus and housing grants for low-wage workers, as well as Central Provident Fund top-ups for those aged 50 and above.

Singaporeans who fall into these categories are the concerns, too, of Tampines GRC MP Irene Ng, who readily admits that such concerns are not directly related to her GPC.

The deputy chairman of the GPC for Defence and Foreign Affairs said she will press for more better-paying jobs for older workers, 'not just jobs like cleaning and security guards'.

'Many of them do their best and are not afraid of making drastic changes to get a job. But they must be given a chance to get decent jobs with decent pay,' she said.

One of the aims of Dr Lily Neo, chairman of the GPC for Education, is to rope in teachers to spot potential dropouts before they go on to possibly become the next-generation low-wage earners.

'We have a first-class education system and first-class infrastructure, but why can't we curb our school dropout rate?' asked the Jalan Besar GRC MP.

Bread-and-butter issues aside, there are also evergreen concerns such as health-care costs and public housing policies.

For instance, Hong Kah GRC MP Amy Khor, chairman of the GPC for National Development and Environment, wants the resale levy system on HDB flats to be simplified.

Madam Halimah Yacob, who heads the GPC for Health and is an MP for Jurong GRC, will ask, among other things, for details on how the Medisave can be made flexible - such as for those seeking outpatient treatment for chronic illnesses.

There is no better time at which to reflect the concerns on the ground. This is because the Budget debate 'is one of the best opportunities where our voices can be heard the loudest', said Aljunied GRC MP Yeo Guat Kwang, chairman of the GPC for Manpower.

MPs said their raising such matters in the House has little to do with there being a general election round the corner.

'What translates into votes is not necessarily what you raise occasionally in Parliament,' said Dr Ahmad Magad, GPC chairman for Finance and Trade and Industry. The Pasir Ris-Punggol GRC MP said what counts is 'how well you work the ground and your visibility in your constituency'.

Tanjong Pagar GRC MP Chong Weng Chiew added: 'I am more concerned about how raising these issues will help my residents and improve their lives. Isn't that what being an MP is about?'

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