

April 13 2015

English translation of Speech by NMP Thomas Chua

Housing and Development (Amendment) Bill [Bill No. 10/2015]

Madam Speaker, firstly, I would like to declare that I am the President of the Singapore Chinese Chamber of Commerce & Industry. Having carefully examined the relevant clauses, I support the Bill. However, after reading through more than 20 pages of this Bill, it has stirred up many thoughts and reservations. I hope that using legislation to solve such problems would only be used as a last resort.

The objective of amending this Bill is mainly to empower HDB officials to enter the HDB premises to investigate or arrange for renovation work. Are these matters so serious that they warrant legislation before they can be resolved? When I was young, having neighbours help each other out was very common. Everyone would reach out to help whichever household needed assistance. Whenever we patronised the kopitiam to drink coffee, the proprietors would remember which customers preferred to have less sugar, and whose children attended certain schools; if we went to the neighbourhood provision shop to buy soya sauce, we would always linger to chat with the proprietors. This frequent interaction among neighbours, watching out for each other and helping one another, was part and parcel of the kampung spirit we always talk about.

In the 50 years since Singapore gained independence, the Housing and Development Board has provided the majority of Singaporeans with their own homes, and has continually upgraded their living environment, with the establishment of neighbourhood shops, coffee shops, hair salons, clinics, activity centres, etc, to increase the interaction among residents and promote social bonding and cohesion. This has been a major contribution to social development. Although kampungs have vanished from our modern urbanised city, HDB has already tried its best to preserve the “kampung spirit” in designing HDB flats and neighbourhoods.

If we move back in time to 30 or 40 years ago, two households from the kampungs together moved into new HDB flats. If the Zhang family’s ceiling springs a leak, they would simply go upstairs to the Tan family’s flat to take a

look. Legislation would not be necessary. It is a different story now. Residents seldom interact even if they live in the same building, and are not familiar with one another. They do not know each other's surnames, professions, and do not talk though they may take the same lift. Relations are quite estranged. If there is any knock on the door, residents would speak from behind their iron gates and be very guarded. Hence, we need to amend the Bill to give HDB officials more empowerment. If problems among neighbours need to resort to legislation, this could solve the problem, but it would sever ties that may be impossible to mend.

People's lifestyles are also gradually changing in keeping with the times. Core values differ from one generation to the next, and the social functions of neighbourhood shops and public facilities also need to adapt to the changing times. Unlike the supermarkets and large shopping centres, neighbourhood shops can create a congenial meeting place for all residents, and they need to adjust their business model according to the residents' composition and lifestyle patterns to provide even more unique products and services. Hence, the management of neighbourhood shops should not only be viewed purely in terms of commercial profit, becoming an investment tool or an asset to be resold.

Early this month, the SCCCI specially invited Merchants' Associations from several neighbourhood centres to attend a lunch meeting. Everyone reached a consensus that the rebuilding the "kampung spirit" in their neighbourhoods and new towns, would require the coordination and hard work of many parties. HDB needs to be even more forward-looking in their design concepts, and correspondingly the need of mutual support and coordination amongst the Town Councils, Citizens' Consultative Committees, Community Development Councils, Community Centres and Residents' Committees. Shop owners need to consider ways to do their business better and should actively support the Merchants' Associations. The leadership of the Merchants' Associations needs to demonstrate team effort in strategic planning of innovative ideas and marketing concepts unique to their areas. Although each community congregates organisations with diverse backgrounds, they all serve the same group of people, with the common objective of looking after the interests of their respective residents.

Singapore is a land-scarce country and we have no choice but to construct high-rise buildings. With a more diversified population structure, we need a longer time to establish better understanding and trust among people, and tighten the bonds of social cohesion. This social cohesion pertains to the concern and help from family members, neighbours and friends, and cannot be measured with monetary value. Thus when we face problems, we have to tackle them at the root and not only on the surface. We should not forget that the social function of government housing is to create the opportunity for Singaporeans from different races and ethnicities living in HDB estates to interact and live together in harmony.