

Headline: Tan Chuan-Jin explains trade-offs considered in decision-making

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THE trade-offs that society has to make were at the core of a dialogue yesterday, where Manpower Minister Tan Chuan-Jin explained some of the hard-headed considerations the Government must contend with for a balance in policies.

There are numerous solutions to issues as diverse as foreign labour quotas and carving out more cycling paths. But each also has its own trade-offs, he said.

Mr Tan, speaking at a dialogue with residents after touring Keat Hong ward in Chua Chu Kang GRC, raised the issue of the delicate balancing needed on foreign labour as an example of the kind of trade-offs the Government considers when making decisions.

"While we want to look after the interests of Singaporean businessmen who feel the pinch... the broader situation is that you'd want to keep the growth (of foreign labour) at a more sustainable rate," he said to those seeking a relaxation of foreign labour quotas.

"At the same time, you have some Singaporeans who... want jobs for Singaporeans only. Ultimately that's a fallacy because we hurt only ourselves.

"Competition is happening whether foreigners are here or not. Jobs are being outsourced, and if the company isn't here, the jobs are not even in Singapore."

Trying to balance such diverse views and come up with the right policy requires one to be hard-headed, Mr Tan said, echoing what Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong said in a speech to the National University of Singapore Society earlier this month.

PM Lee had said that Singapore must be good-hearted but also hard-headed. Policies must keep facts in mind, and deal with stark realities like the rapidly ageing population and low fertility rate.

Yesterday, Mr Tan said that even on some straightforward issues, decisions are often hard to make, as resources are finite.

Citing a resident's request for more cycling paths as an example, he asked how many of the nearly 200 residents present would not be willing to give up a car lane or two to make space. Most raised their hands. They were also unwilling to give up green spaces, or do away with pedestrian walkways.

Mr Tan said: "We must care about the community. But we also have to care about the practical realities."

He challenged residents to step up and play their part where they can, to deal with such constraints.

Recalling suggestions for the People's Association or welfare organisations to hold more activities for the lonely elderly, he said: "(We) cannot absolve our own roles in this... There are not enough social workers around to do the heavy lifting."

Most present also raised their hands when asked if they were interested in serving the community. Calling this a good starting point, he said: "If everyone is able to contribute to his constituency in whatever way he can, the country will undergo real change."

Earlier, Mr Tan was the star attraction at a family carnival when he abseiled 11 storeys down a Housing Board block. He did so with Chua Chu Kang GRC MP Zaqy Mohamad and Residents' Committee zone leader Alex Seo to promote an abseiling interest group.

He also launched "Care on Wheels", a programme where volunteers ferry residents who are wheelchair users to hospitals and clinics for appointments. There are 14 volunteers already, many of them taxi drivers, said Mr Zaqy.

Mr Tan was also accompanied on the visit by Chua Chu Kang GRC MPs Gan Kim Yong, who is Health Minister, Alvin Yeo and Alex Yam. Senior Minister of State for Health and Manpower Amy Khor, who is MP for Hong Kah North, was also present.

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