



Minister Lawrence Wong at a Car-Free Sunday event, an initiative to encourage a “car-lite” culture.



INTERVIEW

Lawrence Wong

Co-Creating the Future City

One of Singapore's younger generation of leaders, National Development Minister **Lawrence Wong** has been tasked with charting the city-state's infrastructure and environmental development. In this interview, he tells CLC's Jessica Cheam how the government seeks innovative ways to co-create the future with citizens.

The word “co-create” has been increasingly used by the Singapore government to galvanise citizen participation in policy decisions and public programmes. How would you define this and what role can citizens play?

Nation building is about partnerships. The concept is not new: if you look back at our history, one of our founding leaders, Mr S Rajaratnam, talked about Singapore being a “democracy of deeds”, and this meant having citizen participation at all levels, as he put it, “to solve practical problems in a practical way”. So we've been doing that from the beginnings of Singapore, in different ways, through our volunteers and grassroots.

More recently, we have evolved and strengthened this idea of partnership and citizen participation. A few years ago, we conducted Our Singapore Conversation [a national consultation exercise] to hear from Singaporeans their priorities and hope for the future. This year, we started the SGfuture dialogues to think about Singapore's development for the next 50 years. The key is to go beyond idea generation and start getting people involved in the solutions as well. Ideas are helpful and they contribute towards policymaking, but it's even better to have citizens co-creating the very solutions that will be implemented.

Can you give us a flavour of these ideas, and how have these translated into policies on the ground?

There have been many. One is a URA [Urban Redevelopment Authority] programme called “Our Favourite Place”, which supports people to activate public spaces through ground-up initiatives, such as closing certain streets from vehicular traffic on weekends. It’s been a big success and that’s why URA is prepared to provide seed funding for good ideas, and to help citizens get regulatory approval from different government agencies to translate their ideas into action. We are looking for ideas that can transform public spaces and streets into something that can bring communities together.

The extensive consultation process in the Rail Corridor project was groundbreaking. Tell us about the experience, and were there lessons learnt that can be applied to other projects in the future?

The Rail Corridor is a unique, distinctive site that’s full of history and heritage. It’s a central spine running through our island—much longer than New York’s High Line—that connects more than a million Singaporeans. When the railway line closed in 2011, we felt there was an opportunity to engage Singaporeans in developing the Rail Corridor—from conceptualisation to implementation. That’s why, from an early stage, we started canvassing for ideas on how we can preserve the green spaces while retaining some of the development potential of the land.



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01 Minister Lawrence Wong at a car-free weekend in Kampong Glam, an initiative by the area’s business owners.

02 Minister Lawrence Wong joins in the discussion on ideas to activate public spaces at one of the SGfuture dialogue sessions.



We received many useful ideas that were fed into the design brief put out for experts to formulate a concept plan. The winning proposal came up with a very good plan. But even after that, we have continued to hold focus group sessions with the community to see how this can be translated into something concrete on the ground. Some students from Regent Secondary School were very excited about the plans, which involved building a nursing home. They proposed bringing the seniors to the gardens near the Rail Corridor,

and also having more water activities at the nearby Pang Sua Canal.

Similarly, we're holding extensive consultations for other projects such as the Jurong Lake Gardens, where there's a major planning review to refresh the gardens and to link them to the new Jurong Lake District, which potentially can become our second CBD [Central Business District] with the terminus for the Kuala Lumpur–Singapore high-speed rail ending there.

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The flip side of citizen participation is that you can't please everyone. How did you balance different expectations?

Well, some groups will favour full preservation without any developments, while others would favour more developments and activities. There will be a range of views but that's what the whole consultation process is about. The different stakeholders will eventually try to form a consensus and move forward. That's what we've tried to do, and the process has not ended.

I'm sure there will be more rich conversations about the balance between conservation and development as we implement the Rail Corridor in phases. Regardless of how it will be implemented, our commitment is to make sure that it is kept seamless and that green spaces are preserved. Ultimately, these conversations will give citizens a strong sense of ownership of these public places.

Let's move to broader challenges. Climate change is going to have a huge impact on us in the coming years. What is Singapore's strategy?

Both climate change mitigation and adaptation are necessary. On the mitigation front, we have committed to reduce emissions intensity by 36% (from 2005 levels) by 2030, and we have a comprehensive plan to achieve this. For example, although we are alternative energy-disadvantaged, we have been pushing for solar photovoltaics. HDB's [Housing and Development Board] move to conduct bulk tenders for solar procurement and solar leasing has been very successful. I've been very surprised by the results as they are able to do it at zero cost. It completely pays for itself through the savings generated from using solar panels.

The other major push is on energy efficiency. I think we've done quite well at reducing electricity consumption and encouraging green buildings, but we can

01 Citizens taking a walk down the Rail Corridor, an important part of Singapore's history since it was built in 1903.

02 The roofs of these public housing blocks in Jurong are fitted with solar panels.

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do a lot more. If you look at what happened in Japan after Fukushima, they went on a national energy savings campaign after the nuclear power plants were shut down, and saved about 20% of energy over the course of the year. That's huge! Imagine if we shaved 20% off our peak load. I think there is a lot more scope for us to go with mitigation and we will continue to push on that front. But I hope we don't need a crisis to have that kind of savings mindset.

On adaptation, we have to prepare for the eventuality of sea level rises. Singapore will be at risk because we are low-lying. We have already raised the minimum height requirement for land reclamation and we have various contingency plans for coastline protection, erosion and flood-risk mitigation. The other part of it is food security because climate change can also affect global food supply, and we will be vulnerable because we import most of our food. So we're also looking at ways to improve our food resilience.

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Regarding food security, are we seriously looking at urban farming as a solution?

Yes, I think there is a lot of potential for farming to become more productive in Singapore. Diversification of food sources is important, but we should also improve our local supply. Urban farming includes commercial and community farms. Our commercial farms produce about 7% of our fish consumption, 12% of vegetables, and 25% of eggs, which is not bad. But if you compare our best farms with the most productive ones overseas, their vegetable farms are twice as productive, and their fish farms five to six times more. If we can match that, I think it would significantly enhance our food resilience. We are looking at some of these technologies with AVA [Agri-Food and Veterinary Authority of Singapore], and there is an R&D fund set up to boost farm productivity.

Besides commercial farms, there are more community farms. They may not add significant amounts to food production output, but I think it helps to build that spirit of community in a very positive way and we want to encourage that as well.

“I think there is a lot of potential for farming to become more productive in Singapore.”

Technology is a strong enabler for urban growth and development, but it is traditionally the strength of the private sector. How does your ministry tap technological solutions to achieve its policy objectives?

If you look at our infrastructure and built environment, a lot of the capabilities reside in the public sector. If you think about our underground caverns, industrial buildings and housing infrastructure—we have huge capabilities here. It is something unique to Singapore because we develop through many public sector-led initiatives.

We want to ensure that we continue to grow our expertise, and find ways to turn them into commercial urban solutions that companies can export overseas. Companies like Surbana, Ascendas and Hyflux are good examples.

But the public sector should also recognise that we do not have all the answers and we should rely on new technologies. So we are putting in a lot of R&D investments into corporate labs, corporate research and academics to develop urban solutions.

You co-chair the subcommittee on Future City under the Committee of Future Economy which is tasked to outline Singapore’s economic strategy. Can you give us some insights into this process?

The subcommittee which I am co-chairing is thinking about how urban infrastructure needs to be transformed to support the future economy, and at the same time how infrastructure can be a driver because infrastructural solutions can be a growth sector in its own right.

We have some big ideas like developing our Jurong Lake District as a second CBD, and moving the port from Tanjong Pagar to Tuas to free up waterfront land for development. Beyond that, we’re also looking at clusters around Singapore that can support new economic activities.

One area identified is the e-commerce, digital services and cyber security cluster. We have been discussing how we can provide the infrastructural space to anchor this cluster of digital services, say, in Punggol where the new SIT [Singapore Institute of Technology] campus is. This can become a very exciting place to live, learn, work and play for people in ICT [InfoComm Technology]. We also have the Jurong Innovation District, where the CleanTech Park is, and the Jurong Lake District. That could be a cluster for clean tech and urban solutions companies to form an ecosystem, while creating more jobs for Singaporeans.

Beyond the “hardware” aspect, the whole evolution and development of our city must require citizens and this requires “heartware”. So we’re also thinking hard about how this aspect can be enhanced.



Urban issues are increasingly complex. What do you think are the kind of leadership qualities that we need to tackle these challenges?

Like the past, you need a leader who can set a vision, inspire and persuade people to follow you. In the case of National Development, because of the complex nature of urban work, there's a need for certain pragmatism and to be action-oriented in order to get things done. That's been the whole ethos of MND [Ministry of National Development].

There are two other things which I think are important today. One is persuasion and communication because increasingly it is not about bulldozing your way through but being able to engage diverse stakeholders and find common ground to move forward.

The second is a sense of aesthetics—a sense of space, human scale, and blending nature with design and development—because it's not just about building infrastructure. You need to be tuned to nature and good urban design so that even as we become more developed, we don't feel that we're being squeezed by infrastructure. I think that's an important characteristic for leaders in our sector.

Finally, this interview is for the World Cities Summit issue of *Urban Solutions*. What do you hope the Summit will achieve?

I've always found it very useful to exchange notes with city leaders because all of us are grappling with similar challenges and have innovative ideas to share. If you look around the world, there are at least 400 cities with populations of more than a million people. That's a lot of cities in competition for talent, investments, and to be the next global city. If we can, amidst this competition, have a platform for city leaders to come together and candidly share challenges and effective solutions, I think it would be a useful contribution to address some of the major global challenges. ●

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