

# 'Nature corridor' proposal for railway land

Nature Society's idea incorporates cycling paths, recreational areas

By JEREMY AU YONG

THE Nature Society of Singapore is close to finishing a proposal to convert the 40km stretch of Malayan Railway land here into a green corridor.

It would contain cycling paths connecting different neighbourhoods to the town centre, and recreational spaces. It would also be home to many of Singapore's native plants and animals.

The proposal seeks to preserve the railway tracks, which the society regards as an important part of Singapore's history.

But some property analysts say the proposal will be a hard sell. And even if it is approved, a nature corridor can at best last for a decade or two. The railway corridor will inevitably be developed, for there are sound reasons to incorporate the land into development plans.

Nature Society president Shawn Lum, however, stresses that there are environmental benefits to a nature corridor: "If we could have green strips along the railway land, we would be connecting existing green spots from Sungei Buloh Wetland Reserve in the north all the way to almost Mount Faber."

As a green corridor, the railway land would serve as a sort of Central Expressway for plants and animals. It would allow the movement of species previously cut off from each other, increasing the genetic diversity of local wildlife.



The Malaysian KTM railway line would be a kind of "expressway" for plants and animals under the society's proposal. ST PHOTO: ALPHONSUS CHERN

The idea of such eco-passages is new to Singapore. In May, the Land Transport Authority called for tenders for a 50m-wide green bridge to connect the Bukit Timah Nature Reserve and Central Catchment area. The two reserves are separated by the Bukit Timah Expressway.

The idea of using the 400ha of Malayan Railway land in the same way was

hatched very shortly after the announcement was made in May that Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong and his Malaysian counterpart Najib Razak had agreed to move the Tanjong Pagar Station.

Mr Lum said the Nature Society had long regarded the railway land as a valuable stretch of greenery. It occasionally organised walks there.

A few days after the announcement, Nature Society vice-president Leong Kwok Peng wrote in to The Straits Times Forum page suggesting that the land be converted into a nature corridor.

Since then, others have written in with similar ideas. One suggested converting Tanjong Pagar station into a transport hub for those walking or cycling into the city. He suggested having bike lock-up, pay-shower and locker facilities at the station.

The proposal is due to be submitted to the authorities in the next two weeks.

Mr Howard Shaw, executive director of the Singapore Environment Council, told The Straits Times he supported the idea. Though he noted the need to consider the opportunity cost of not developing the land, he said having a green belt should not be seen as a waste of money.

"There are things like quality of life and Singapore's reputation as a garden city that are intangible and valuable in their own way," he said.

Property veteran Nicholas Mak, executive director of SLP International Property Consultants, however, is doubtful the proposal will fly. He had earlier estimated that millions of square feet of buildings could be put up on the land. He used the swamp land in Punggol as an example.

"Punggol is not in town, yet all the swamp land there has been bulldozed. What are the chances this piece of land on the city fringe would be preserved? It's not even virgin jungle," he said.

Mr Colin Tan, research and consultancy director of Chesterton Suntec International, agreed that the land would ultimately be developed, but he felt there was hope for the society's proposal for the next 10 to 20 years.

"At the moment, there's no urgency to develop that area. The Government is focused on building up places such as Marina Bay. In the short term, it's looking quite good for the proposal, but I don't think it can be left as a green corridor permanently," he said.

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