Towards a city in a garden

House approves Bill to strengthen nature conservation efforts

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It has been some years since the National Parks Board came under the spotlight in Parliament.

Yesterday, though, the agency in charge of Singapore’s natural capital got a boost in political capital when the House passed a Bill to strengthen the Republic’s green efforts.

Key, perhaps, in the new Act were steps to formalise NParks’ regulatory functions — a move, which as Nominiated MP Geh Min observed, appear to give the board more powers.

Now, developers are required to separately seek approval from NParks for their greenery provisions instead of relying on the approval processes of other agencies, such as the Urban Redevelopment Authority.

The Bill raised the fines from $10,000 from $50,000 and allows NParks to recover the value of the destroyed tree or plant.

MP Amy Khor (Hong Kah GRC) urged the ministry to be even-handed for their greenery provisions instead of separately seeking approval from NParks to give the board more powers.

Saying she has learned that “when talking to hard-headed policy makers, one should give hard figures”, her speech highlighted the “potential scientific and economic value” of Singapore’s natural resources. “Our laws should protect them as our natural reserves in the same way we protect our fiscal reserves,” she argued.

In his response, Second Minister for National Development Lim Swee Say said it was about balance.

“From time to time we may have to subtract value from our natural capital in order to create economic value. It is also important for us to recognise that we do invest some of our economic value to create natural value,” he said.

The latest land allocation for conservation comes with the heritage road scheme, which requires green buffers of 10 metres along roads with mature roadside greenery.

NParks has gazetted South Buona Vista Road, Mount Pleasant Road, Mandai Road, Lim Chu Kang Road, and Arcadia Road under this scheme. “A watchlist” of roads, which will get special attention if developments are made, has already been compiled.

Mr Lim assured Dr Geh and Dr Khor that public input would be welcome for both schemes.

Both MPs urged greater community ownership of the environment, which Mr Lim said would be the next step as Singapore evolves from a garden city into a city in a garden.

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Dr Geh Min, NMP

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More to MPs’ work than attending Parliament

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came mostly from Choa: “That’s why I didn’t seek a second term. But when you do attend, you must put in that useful comment.”

The majority of MPs did not miss more than 15 per cent — or more than 13 days — of Parliament. Only 10 backbenchers were absent more often than that.

Though he does not have comparative figures from other legislatures, political scientist Ho Khai Leong said that he was not “too impressed” with attendance records from the House.

“Attendance is taken when you appear. You can stay five or 10 minutes and leave but be counted as present. Seldom will you find MPs who stay for the whole session,” he said.

But he acknowledged that, unlike in many other countries, almost all the backbenchers here have full time jobs in addition to their elected positions.

In response, Mr Shanmugam, who attended 9 sittings, said: “I think I do my duty. I speak when there is an issue which I feel strongly about. When I’m in Court or on other related work, I am unable to attend Parliament.”

The job of an MP, of course, goes beyond attending Parliament, although that is arguably their most visible role because of media coverage.

They also sit on various committees, such as standing select committees, where they examine the Government budget, for example — both behind closed doors and in public — and travel overseas on parliamentary visits.

Meet-the-People sessions are another key activity MPs undertake to represent and serve their constituents. And it is the work on the ground that Mr Singh thinks residents will remember better, as the impact is more direct.

“If one of the constituents has issues, you can take it up with the relevant authorities and you can get answers there. You can ask the minister and decide if the answer is satisfactory,” he said. “There are different ways of doing things.”

“I don’t think Singaporeans think that (we’ve compromised our duty) because if it’s a general feeling, you would expect the Opposition to take advantage of that. They would go for constiuencies with litigators and capitalise on it.”

Ironically, the lack of elected opposition MPs may be one reason why attendance counts, at least according to one analyst.

“Having one party dominate the system... you’d expect some measure of unanimity. So you don’t need the full comple of 80-plus MPs... (unlike it) was a more competitive setting,” said Institute of Policy Studies research fellow Gillian Koh.

“So, it boils down to the convictions of MPs and how they define their roles and responsibilities. Some might sit in for the educational value.”

This is one reason why Dr Lily Neo (Jalan Besar GRC), who along with Dr Tan Boon Wan (Ang Mo Kio GRC) and Mr Haseeb Dossa (Sembawang GRC), did not miss a single sitting.

“It depends on your priorities. I want to participate and I don’t want to miss anything. For me, it is important because when you are in Parliament, you can speak out... and you also learn a lot about policies and the workings of other MPs,” she said.

Ms Indranee Rajah missed 24 sittings because of court and arbitration hearings and workrelated travel, but she adjusts her schedule around the time of her speeches because she sees this as the “primary role” of an MP.

Mr Singh said he would speak in Parliament only when he felt an issue needed to be raised in public.

According to the records, he made one speech: On whether or not to adopt the CPF scheme.

Mr Shanmugam spoke twice — on the White Paper for the JI arrests and the threat of terrorism, and on the penal code.

All were considered good speeches, and so was Ms Olsen’s maiden speech — another reader, Eugene Tan, called it “excellent”.

But, it was her earlier absence that got more media coverage.