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Heritage roads

Ambience of selected scenic roads are to be preserved

By Joyce Teo

THE preservation of Singapore's greenery gained new emphasis yesterday when laws were changed to conserve scenic, tree-lined roads and save mature trees from being recklessly chopped down.

Selected roads that enhance Singapore's image as a garden city will be gazetted as Heritage Roads and these roads are to be given a green buffer of up to 10m wide at their sides.

Existing private landowners will be exempted from this requirement but not subsequent new owners, following amendments made to the Parks and Trees Act in Parliament yesterday.

So far, the National Parks Board (NParks) has identified five such roads: South Buona Vista, Mount Pleasant, Mandai, Lim Chu Kang and Arcadia Roads.

However, it has also drawn up a watch-list of roads that will be given special attention when there is a possibility that development could threaten their environment.

Second Minister for National Development Lim Swee Say, in seeking these changes, vowed that all government agencies, including the Land Transport Authority and the Urban Redevelopment Authority, would be vigilant.

'We'll make sure that all alternatives are being explored and the impact on the environment will be fully assessed,' he said during the Second Reading of the Parks and Trees Bill.

In all, 10 Bills were passed yesterday.

This latest move by Mr Lim puts into law an old scheme. In 2001, the Heritage Roads Scheme was introduced and 55 roads were designated. Among them were Redhill Close, Yuan Ching Road, Nassim Road, Yishun Avenue 5, Lornie Road, Old Punggol Road, and Goodwood Hill.
Trees too are to be preserved under the new Act, which comes into effect in May.

Stiff fines face those who cut down, without permission, any tree with a girth exceeding 1m in a designated Tree Conservation Area, vacant land, national parks and nature reserves.

They could be fined up to $50,000, up from $10,000.

The fine is on top of the compensation NParks can seek from the offender and a possible jail term of up to six months.

The changes sparked a debate between Mr Lim and Hong Kah GRC MP Amy Khor and Nature Society president Geh Min, a Nominated MP.

Dr Geh urged the Government to guard its natural reserves as carefully as its fiscal reserves.

In reply, Mr Lim said that at the heart of the debate is the need to balance preserving natural capital and meeting the needs of land use.

'From time to time, we may have to subtract value from our natural capital in order to create economic value,' he said.

But at the same time, the Government does invest economic value to create natural value, an example being the upcoming second Botanic Gardens in Marina Bay, which will cost the Government 'hundreds of millions of dollars', he said.

He assured Dr Khor that NParks will be highly selective in picking Heritage Roads.

'We do not expect too many roads to qualify... we do not think the impact on the land value will be significant,' he said.

On the contrary, Mr Lim foresees the value of the surroundings to go up 'because I think everybody who lives in the city would like to live on a Heritage Road'.