Lively debate
over fate of cemetery

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There was no end to the questions, so much so that the symposium ran for more than three hours, and the organisers had to start ushering people out.

The issue? Bukit Brown.

More than 250 people turned up at a public forum on the historic cemetery yesterday. Volleys of probing queries were fired at the expert panel working to document and preserve the site’s graves and ecology.

The symposium, the first of its kind on Bukit Brown, was co-organised by the Singapore Heritage Society (SHS) and the National University of Singapore (NUS) South-east Asian Studies Society.

Packing a small hall in the Asian Civilisations Museum, the audience heard out the five experts – moderated by NUS architectural historian Lai Chee Kien – who made presentations on the cemetery’s heritage and ecological value.

The blitz of queries followed in the Q&A session.

A few did offer the panel tips on furthering the conservation work. One person suggested creating a publicity video on the historic site and uploading it onto YouTube; another proposed putting the cemetery up for Unesco world heritage site status.

But for every tip there were many more questions, and as the evening wore on, past its second hour, the crowd grew restive, eager to be heard.

To many, talk about documenting the graves seemed to signal that the experts had given up the fight to stop the road construction altogether – though two of the five had said earlier that it was not the graves, but the proposed road, that should give way.

The two were cemetery guide Raymond Goh and NUS anthropologist Irving Chan Johnson. The other panellists were Dr Hui Yew-foong, the anthropologist leading the documentation project; Dr Ho Hua Chew of the Nature Society (Singapore); and Mr Chew Kheng Chuan, the great-grandson of pioneer Chew Boon Lay, who is buried at the cemetery.

Why the air of resignation, teacher Lisa Li, 30, asked the panel, earning appreciative nods in the audience.

“As a concerned citizen, I just cannot accept that this will happen,” she added.

Logistics director Gregory Loh, 48, wanted to know if SHS was concerned that in proceeding with the documentation project, the wrong idea would be conveyed to the Government that the SHS accepted its decision.

Ms Tan Beng Chiak, 48, a teacher, said she did not want to volunteer for the documentation project for this reason precisely – she felt it signalled that the graves were a lost cause.

Frustrated by what she felt was missing in the debate so far, Ms Claire Leow, 44, a heritage enthusiast, blurted: “Why has the Heritage Society stayed so silent on this issue?”

Amid calls for the heritage groups and experts to stand up for the cemetery in their discussions with government bodies, Dr Ho urged the audience to do their part too.

He said heritage groups had not given up the fight, but that the work could not be done by the groups alone.

“If you don’t agree, say something,” he said.

“Things can happen, but the ground must be moving too.”