More hawker centres in the works?

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SINGAPORE — Between 1971 and 1985, hawker centres were built to resettle street hawkers into purpose-built buildings with proper sanitation and amenities.

The hawker centres have become a landscape icon as well as a social institution where Singaporeans, regardless of socio-economic status, can mingle. Today, more than a quarter of a century since the last hawker centre was built, some Singaporeans — especially those living in young estates built after 1985 — are clamouring for more of these centres.

And Toow understands the authorities are looking into the possibility of building more hawker centres, 25 years after the last one was built. This is understood to be the hawker centre at Block 505, Jurong West Street 52.

There are currently 112 hawker centres across the island — with 107 managed by the National Environment Agency (NEA) and five by JTC.

Ang Mo Kio GRC MP Inderjit Singh pointed to an increased population and the creation of new estates as good reasons to build more hawker centres. "The rentals are low, and they offer good quality food at affordable prices," said Mr Singh.

Residents at young estates who spoke to Toow agreed.

Sengkang resident Amy Tan, 29, lamented about the long queues and the quality of the food at the existing eateries near her home. Punggol resident Daniel Hakim, 20, added that, unlike food courts or coffeeshops, hawker centres offer a wide range of food. "A lot of young couples live in Punggol and they often buy out, you don't want to buy the same thing every day," the national serviceman said.

Responding to Toow's queries, an NEA spokesperson noted that apart from hawker centres, there are other food establishments such as coffee shops and food courts to meet the needs of residents.

The Hawker Centres Upgrading Programme (HUP) was launched in 2001 to ensure that they remain relevant. They have bigger stalls, wider passageways, better ventilation, upgraded toilets and more seats for the customers.

"On the whole, the upgrading aims to provide a more conducive dining and marketing environment for stallholders and residents," the NEA spokesperson added. Currently, the NEA manages about 6,000 cooled food stalls. Of which, about half are paying subsidised rents.

THE ALLURE OF HAWKER CENTRES

Professor Lily Kong, author of Singapore Hawker Centres and Geography don at the National University of Singapore, told Toow there is a view that new housing estates may not be able to support hawker centres, given the attraction and availability of air-conditioned food courts.

But she noted that, more than just offering affordable food, hawker centres are "part of the warp and woof of daily life". She added that some hawker centres are "deliberately located" next to open spaces in housing estates, "so that there is a seamless integration with community activities".

Food courts seem more "formal" and not the place to loiter, while hawker centres are highly informal settings, she added.

Food blogger Leslie Tay is another fan of hawker centres. The general practitioner pointed out that hawker centres also provide "cheap and practical means for anyone to make a living." "Private coffeeshops and shop space are often too expensive as it is pegged to market rates," Dr Tay said.

Some observers noted that with the Government having completed its task of resettling the street hawkers, the job of building more hawker centres could lie with the private sector.

Food consultant K F Seetoh felt that there are "enough" hawker centres, given that some have difficulties attracting stallholders.

Building new hawker centres may not mean that the standard of food will remain authentic, he noted. "Where are the new generation of hawkers? Our industry infrastructure is not churning out new hawkers," Mr Seetoh said.

Still, he reiterated that hawker centres are "not just about the food but a place to hang out (for) families, the rich and the poor". "Food courts are functional. You eat and you get out. No one talks about the quality of food at food courts," he added.