Bukit Timah back to NUS?

NUS now seen as likely candidate to win tussle over historical site

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THE National University of Singapore (NUS) could be getting its third campus after all. A week after TODAY raised the possibility that plans for a proposed NUS Buona Vista campus had fallen through, speculation is now rife that the institution is a strong favourite to reclaim its former home in Bukit Timah.

This would bring to an end a lengthy tussle between NUS and Nanyang Technological University (NTU) over who would get to use the sprawling 11-hectare plot of land in Bukit Timah, currently occupied by the Singapore Management University (SMU).

The campus, at No 469 Bukit Timah Road, must be vacated by SMU before its lease expires on July 31, said an SMU spokesman. SMU will move to its new city campus in Bras Basah for the coming academic year.

Sources told TODAY that an announcement on the future of the Bukit Timah site could be made by the end of this month, with the NUS widely expected to become its permanent occupant.

The campus was occupied by Raffles College from 1929 to 1949; the University of Malaya between 1949 and 1962; the University of Singapore from 1962 to 1981 and, finally, the National Institute of Education (NIE) between 1982 and 2000.

Last July, NUS' alumni body, the NUS Society, appealed to its members to show their support for the acquisition of the campus.

In about a week, 1,700 signatures were gathered and presented to the Ministry of Education (MOE). The MOE is evaluating both universities' proposals, which were submitted last year.

The NTU wants the campus for its business school. It said in reports last year that links to the site are strong because the NIE, which is now part of NTU, had its home at Bukit Timah for 18 years.

NUS society president Lai Kim Seng: "We feel confident that we have a reasonable case, and we wanted to appeal to the Minister for Education Tharman Shanmugaratnam. We couldn't possibly call ourselves a hundred years old if we cannot get this campus, to which we have strong historical links."

As the NUS celebrates its centenary this year, Mr Lai, 65, of the class of 1971, believes it would be "ideal" and a "nice gesture" if the decision went in its favour.

"All great universities have their roots. Having this part of our heritage is important for all our alumni to foster a greater sense of belonging," he added.

In June last year, the NUS put in a formal request for the campus to be used for its growing law and business faculties and Mr Lai said this would be a "practical" move.

"After all, our Law and Arts and Social Sciences faculties were established at Bukit Timah many years ago, so there's plenty of history. It's definitely meaningful and it would seem logical that the law and business schools were located there, if possible."

Another alumnus, Professor Kirpal Singh of the class of 1972, said: "It would be ideal for a law faculty. Potential lawyers will need space for serious thought, and the environment at Bukit Timah provides this with its natural greenery and old-world charm."

"The site is so intimately associated with tertiary education. I think whoever moves in here will benefit tremendously from the sheer knowledge that, on this sacred ground, Singapore's top leaders were nurtured and history has been made and remade."