From 3-room HDB flats to high-tech student hostels

By Tan Hui Yee

TWO blocks of flats in Boon Lay, formerly home to foreign workers, are being turned into a hostel for students.

The 200 three-room flats, located in the middle of a Housing Board estate in Boon Lay Drive built in the 1970s, will get a makeover worth at least $4 million to give their future tenants the convenience of wireless Internet connections and a security system that uses fingerprint-analysis to control access into the building.

The hostel will cater to mainly tertiary students, although some units will be set aside for Boon Lay residents in need of temporary housing.

The self-contained, fully furnished hostel units can take up to six people in each apartment, though tenants would have to supply their own stoves and some other housing appliances.

Although rents have yet to be finalised, each tenant is likely to pay $220 to $500 per month – inclusive of utilities, up to a limit.

Renting an entire apartment alone could set the tenants back by up to $1,300 a month if the bedrooms are air-conditioned.

On the ground floor of the hostel will be shared facilities like a TV lounge, a computer room and a laundry.

The first students will move in by April.

A similar project was carried out in Prinsep Street last year. Three blocks of former HDB flats in the Selegie area were converted into a hostel for students of Singapore Management University. It is now 85 per cent occupied.

At Boon Lay, Housing Board subsidiary EM Services will manage blocks 189 and 190 as a hostel for six years, after winning a tender called last year.

The marketing director of EM Services, Mr Andy Low, told The Straits Times it wanted to create a “cosy, comfortable place for students at affordable rates” at the upcoming hostel in Boon Lay.

Meanwhile, the MP for Boon Lay, Madam Ho Geok Choo, is looking forward to the life the foreign students will bring to the estate.

“This will bring younger people into the ageing community and make it more vibrant. It will also push the merchants here to upgrade their businesses to cater to them.”

The two blocks are part of a cluster of four in the area that housed foreign workers from mainly the manufacturing and engineering sectors.

The blocks were fully vacated last year, after the companies housed their employees in purpose-built dormitories or moved elsewhere.

The three-room flats in the other two HDB blocks will be converted to one- and two-room rental units for low-income Singaporeans.