

PETITION NATION

More Singaporeans are turning to petitions to get their views heard, but how effective are they?

Tan Dawn Wei

It is a sign of the times. Singapore is becoming a sign, sign, sign city state – judging by the spike in online and offline petitions.

Recent hot-button issues like the “mis-selling” of financial products and the furore over a dormitory for foreign workers in a private estate had made the news with push from the petition wagon.

But other petitions, raised more quietly, may also have reached policymakers’ ears.

IT strategist Kennedy Chew, 46, believes the petition he and other Sungei Ulu Pandan residents started to preserve a part of the woodland there had some effect.

Earlier this year, he had heard that the Housing Board was going to raze his favourite jogging spot in the woodland to build new flats.

He and three other residents sent e-mail appeals to the official feedback unit, Reach, as well as the HDB. They then met the ward’s MP, wrote to National Development Minister Mah Bow Tan and even asked to meet the board’s designers

and architects.

Feeling they were getting nowhere, they petitioned fellow residents.

“We had this sense of frustration. We hoped that with more people, the issue won’t be seen as just coming from the few of us,” said the father of two, who has lived in the area for the past 12 years.

For six weeks, the group petitioned park-goers, went door to door and dropped fliers in HDB, condominium and landed property mailboxes from Dover to Clementi.

They collected 1,330 names for a petition sent to the Prime Minister.

Although they did not hear from the PM, Dr Chew believes the petition helped in the HDB’s decision to retain a green strip of 30 trees there. “We may have achieved something,” he said.

Among the high-profile petitions, the most recent were those by aggrieved investors of financial products linked to failed United States investment bank Lehman Brothers.

Three petitions – with a total of 3,000 signatures – have been sent to the Monetary Authority of Singa-

pore (MAS) since September, urging action from the regulator.

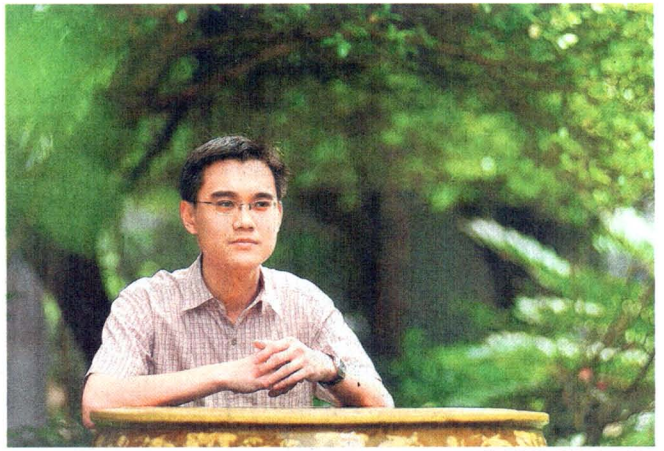
In August, a group of mothers-to-be penned a petition to the PM asking that newly announced baby perks be brought forward.

In September, 1,600 residents of Serangoon Gardens had handed in an appeal to the authorities opposing the siting of a foreign workers’ dormitory in their midst.

When contacted, the Prime Minister’s Office said it does get a “high volume” of petitions. But it did not provide figures.

Analysts felt that, given that outdoor demonstrations were allowed in Hong Lim Park only two months ago, creating an online petition requires just a few mouse clicks, making it a convenient public advocacy tool.

Some, like Singapore Management University law lecturer Eugene Tan, noted that decision-makers here, while not dismissive of them, do not use petitions as a guide to governance. He said: “That’s good because otherwise there will be petition upon petition, ‘counter-petitions’ against petitions. It is then a matter of the loudest, which may not be rep-



Dunman Secondary alumnus Tan Shao Yi started a petition against a move to tweak the school’s badge and motto. A compromise was later reached.

resentative of ground sentiment.”

But he agreed that petitions have a role to play as one mode of citizenry activism and political expression.

“It’s a platform for expression, and gives government, businesses and other relevant parties a pulse on how a decision that is made or about to be made is causing concern,” he said.

Meanwhile, Mr Tan Kin Lian, the former NTUC Income CEO who initiated the three petitions on behalf of aggrieved investors, said: “I hope that a large number of signatures will make a difference in getting the Government to be aware of the strong support for the proposed actions.”

He has not heard from the MAS about the petitions. But local banks have since begun to address the grievances.

Getting a petition going is just one step, said Institute of Policy Studies senior research fellow Tan Tam How. “There are many petitions which die quiet deaths. Often, effort needs to be put in online and offline to get a campaign going and seen through to the end,” he said.

He does not believe that online petitions are less effective than physical ones despite issues about authenticity of signatures and possibly duplicate signatories, “especially if effort is made to bring the results to the attention of the mass media and the authorities”.

The recent case of Dunman Secondary’s school badge facelift, which saw an online petition leading to the school modifying its stance, affirms Mr Tan’s point.

When Dunman alumnus Tan Shao Yi, 28, sought a collective stand over his alma mater’s decision to tweak its school badge and motto three weeks ago, he sent out messages to two alumni groups on social networking site Facebook and his old schoolmates’ personal mailing lists, canvassing for signatures.

Within two weeks, he collected more than 500 signatures.

“That’s something you can’t do with physical petitions,” the systems engineer said of the Internet’s reach.

The petition was sent to the school, the Education Ministry, the school alumni association and the school’s advisory committee – by post.

Last Wednesday, he and a few others met the principal and Education Ministry officials for a discussion, and a decision was made to keep the school motto. He is happy with the outcome, seeing it as a “compromise”.

But for every success story, there are many other efforts that do not see the light of day.

Last year, more than 2,000 people signed a petition to repeal Section 377A of the Penal Code which criminalises gay sex. The petition was submitted to Parliament and debated rigorously but the law eventually stayed in the statutes.

Mr Tan Kin Lian thinks the perceived spike in petitions shows that people feel strongly on certain issues, and “the existing channels to express these views are not effective”.

Ultimately, those interviewed said there is no one superior way to effect change.

What Singaporeans need is a full palette of techniques for communicating with the Government, said Dr Kenneth Paul Tan, assistant dean at the Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy.

“With experience, we will become more adept and creative at choosing the most effective means to advance worthy causes,” he said.

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Do you think petitions are a good way to get heard in Singapore? Send your views to suntimes@sph.com.sg