

# LTA chief listens to 'customers'

When Mr Yam Ah Mee took over as chief executive of the Land Transport Authority (LTA) in May 2005, the statutory board was still grappling with the after-effects of the Nicoll Highway collapse – a Circle Line tunnelling accident that claimed the lives of four workers. Staff morale was down, so was public confidence. As he prepares to leave LTA to helm the People's Association on June 1, he reflects on his five-year tenure.



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ASK Mr Yam Ah Mee about the Land Transport Authority (LTA) and you will get an answer that is both grandiose and accurate: The statutory board's work touches the lives of each and every person in Singapore "at least four times a day".

Stepping into the breach, then, is no easy task, especially when you consider that Mr Yam took the reins just a year after the Nicoll Highway collapse, easily a low water mark in the LTA's history.

"Everyone at the LTA was jarred by the Nicoll Highway incident," recalls Mr Yam, 52. "It was important to restore employee morale as well as public confidence."

His first task, then, was to instil a strong safety culture. That much was, perhaps, obvious. But Mr Yam also had to look beyond that, and shape the LTA for the

years ahead.

To do that, he decided, he had to listen to his "customers" – not the easiest thing for a nuts and bolts, engineering-oriented body to do.

"Our focus on getting the work done and meeting deadlines meant that a lot of people saw us as pretty hard-nosed," he says, while unwittingly sending a signal about how difficult it was to think about touchy-feely issues such as feedback and consultation by sitting ramrod-straight throughout the 90-minute interview.

Adds the one-time air force brigadier-general, who was transferred to the LTA from the Transport Ministry, where he was deputy secretary, on May 11, 2005: "But we realised that taking the time to not only listen to what people had to say, but also actively incorporate ideas where we can, pays real dividends for all of us."

But more of that later.

First, though, he had to set things right on the safety front.

One of his first actions was to set up a division in charge of all things related to construction safe-

ty – headed by a group of four people – someone high up enough on the totem pole to give it real teeth.

Its mandate was to consider safety aspects even before a construction contract was awarded.

This was on top of putting in place all the recommendations made by the committee of inquiry into the Nicoll Highway collapse, which included reviewing the criteria of how tenders were awarded, appointing independent engineering checkers and making temporary structures in deep tunnels as strong as permanent ones.

Almost immediately, results began to show.

Audits by DuPont Safety Resources, an international safety assessor, showed steady improvement in scores over the years.

"Back in 2002, 2003, we scored 2.3 points out of 5. Then in 2007, we scored 3.7. And last year, we got a 4.07 score, which puts us among the top 5 per cent to 10 per cent of world organisations," he says with visible pride.

The steady improvement helped raise staff morale, he adds, and "it was a reaffirmation of the public's trust in us".

Once the safety issue was settled, he set about his second task, and on that front, too, things worked out fairly well.

The culture of talking to people, inviting feedback and opening up led to several changes to longstanding policies over the years, including:

- Introducing a cash rebate for scrapped cars (previously, owners were given tax credits which they could use for their next car);

- Allowing for full-day free usage of off-peak cars on Saturdays and the eve of five major public holidays (previously, free usage was allowed only from 3pm);

- Lowering the barriers to the import of used cars by extending scrap rebate benefits to such cars, which was not done in the past;

- Allowing the conversion of used cars to rental vehicles, something that was previously illegal;

- Halving the certificate of entitlement bidding deposit to \$5,000 to ease motor firms' cash-flow during the recession; and

- Making public transport wheelchair-accessible.

Before embarking on a major review of the land transport system, the LTA also held 14 dialogue sessions with grassroots leaders and advisers from all 84 constituencies. In all, about 4,500 people attended.

These exercises may sound like a policymaker's dream, but not all the attempts to reach out to Singaporeans were exclusively results-oriented.

Some, like the distribution of 10,000 CDs of interactive games to schoolchildren, followed by a "Great Transport Challenge" e-game for grown-ups, were designed to engage.

Others were plain light-hearted. With the opening of the Kallang-Paya Lebar Expressway (KPE) two years ago, the LTA launched a portal with food guide Makansutra to show motorists which eating places they could access via the KPE.

"The website registered over a million hits in less than two months of being launched," recalls Mr Yam, who will be replacing People's Association head Tan Boon Huat, who will be retiring on June 1.

Despite talking about the serious work done by the LTA throughout the interview, the engineer by training lets on several times that people were a big concern for him.

He lights up when describing events such as the walk-and-run held in the KPE's 9km stretch of tunnel just before it opened to motorists, which attracted 15,000.

"The happy faces I saw that day really touched my heart," he beams. "It reminded me that the work the LTA does is very meaningful to people."

"Transport really affects everybody. Each day, you make a trip to work and back, or to school and back. And then, maybe out for a meal and back. So you are affected by transport at least four times a day," he says.

One incident, in particular, brought home that truth with a bang, and illustrated to Mr Yam that for all its efforts, the LTA could, from time to time, pay better attention to people.

It concerned a new ruling introduced on March 1, 2008, which allowed taxis to pick up and let off passengers only at designated taxi stands in the city.

The ruling created an outcry from cabbies as well as commuters, who said it was unnecessarily rigid and inconvenient.

Two weeks later, the LTA amended the ruling, allowing unrestricted pick-ups and drop-offs along side roads where buses do not ply.

"We believed we had done our necessary homework to roll out this new policy. But in fact, it became clear that we needed to do more," he recalls.

People aside, Mr Yam – who will be succeeded by Mr Chew Hock Yong, deputy secretary at the Ministry of Community Development, Youth and Sports – says there were several other

high points of his tenure. One was the September 2005 groundbreaking of Contract 828, which was the new Nicoll Highway station project, as well as the opening of Stage 3 of the Circle Line last May.

He is also looking forward to the opening of Stages 1 and 2 on April 17.

What would he like to be remembered most for as LTA chief?

Here, he reverts to engineer mode, giving an answer that seems scripted, but which he delivers earnestly: "I would like to be remembered as someone who has helped to open up all these channels of communications to better connect people through transport."

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## PART OF EVERYDAY LIFE

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Outgoing LTA chief executive Yam Ah Mee



One of Mr Yam's first actions as LTA chief executive was to set up a division to oversee construction safety. It has improved safety standards over the years, and has helped raise staff morale and reaffirm the public's trust in the statutory board, he says. ST PHOTO: TERENCE TAN