

Parties use time with residents differently

Campaigning in Punggol East enters its last day today

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FOR the People's Action Party (PAP), it's heavyweights, including cabinet members, MPs and even the Speaker of Parliament, visiting and speaking to residents.

For the Workers' Party (WP), campaign time in Punggol East has been an opportune time to introduce potential candidates for the next General Election. (See report on facing page.)

As campaigning in the ward enters its last day today, the two parties – in a four-cornered fight – have used the time with residents differently.

The PAP's Dr Koh Poh Koon has been pounding the beat with his grassroots supporters.

But he also has had the backing of party heavyweights, including Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong and Law and Foreign Minister K Shanmugam, who have been meeting residents separately.

Even from the sidelines of a Chinese New Year lunch for the elderly, Education Minister Heng Swee Keat weighed in on the need to elect the right candidate who can represent the interests of the residents in the constituency.

And on Tuesday, Deputy Prime Minister Teo Chee Hean met residents and spoke of Dr Koh's plans for the estate, which includes new childcare centres, pushing for feeder bus services and exploring options for more wet markets.

Yesterday, the new Speaker of Parliament, Madam Halimah Yacob, endorsed Dr Koh as a man who will speak up for Singaporeans with passion and rigour.

While DPM Teo and PM Lee provided firepower during the Hougang by-election last May, even more heavyweights and PAP MPs have travelled to Punggol East to speak to residents.

That's a lot for a constituency of just over 31,000 voters.

"It shows PAP takes the by-election very seriously," said Singapore Management University law lecturer Eugene Tan.

"The by-election is laden with symbolic meaning. If the PAP wins by less than 50 per cent, some may look at this as a defeat.

"So they are not going to take things for granted," he said.

Assistant Professor Tan said that in the 2011 General Election, Punggol East was fourth from the bottom of the 12 Single Member Constituencies. PAP won with 54.54 per cent of the votes to WP's 41.01.

"It's not a strong PAP seat. The heavyweights showing up in Punggol East is an attempt to ensure that the



POUNDING THE BEAT: The PAP's Dr Koh Poh Koon has been pounding the beat with his grassroots supporters.

PICTURE: THE STRAITS TIMES

party doesn't suffer a defeat which could make the task of governing a challenge," he said.

But heavyweights also back up the candidates' promises.

Political observer

"The incumbent can get support from the Government, and the Government has the budget and the means," explained political observer Mano Sabnani.

Having the party's bigwigs and its rank and file accompany its candidate is not unusual, said National University of Singapore's political science lecturer Bilveer Singh.

"They are there to show support for the candidate. If they didn't, people will question why. It could also be a game changer," he said.

Associate Professor Singh said WP's top brass also showed their support for their candidate, Ms Lee Li Lian, by accompanying her on the campaign trail.

But the impact on voters is unclear.

Said Prof Singh: "Voters, by and large, have already decided who they are going to vote for.

"There will be a small group of those who are unde-

cided, but the impact (of PAP top brass visiting the constituency with its candidate) will be minimal," he said.

Sales and marketing manager N. Prakesh, 41, disagreed.

He said: "If they visit us, it'll affect my vote if they understand and listen to my issues. MPs and Ministers coming to listen to us will definitely lend a personal touch.

"It's like addressing us residents directly."

There's more to it, said Madam Ye Yee Lan, who is in her 60s.

The retiree who met the PAP team said: "It's good that they are doing this. It's a form of politeness."

Madam Chew Poh Yoke, 54, said she hasn't had a chance to meet Dr Koh, though she heard that PM Lee had visited Rivervale Plaza last week.

She said she's hoping with the visit will come the goodies, some of which have already been highlighted, including childcare centres and possibility of more bus services.

But visit or not, she said she has made up her mind who she's going to vote for.

— Additional reporting by Kerri Heng and Nathaniel Hong