

SPEECH BY DR VIVIAN BALAKRISHNAN, MINISTER FOR COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT, YOUTH AND SPORTS AND SECOND MINISTER FOR INFORMATION, COMMUNICATIONS AND THE ARTS, AT THE LAUNCH OF SBS TRANSIT LTD WHEELCHAIR ACCESSIBLE BUSES AT PASIR RIS BUS TERMINAL, MONDAY, 26 JUNE 2006, 3.00PM

Mr Lim Jit Poh, Chairman, SBS Transit

BG (NS) Yam Ah Mee, Chief Executive, Land Transport Authority

Mr Gerard Ee, Chairman, Public Transport Council

Mr Tam Ah Hock, President, Handicaps Welfare Association

Mr See Cher, President, Society for the Physically Disabled

Ladies and gentlemen

I am delighted to be here with you this afternoon as we mark a milestone to make our public transport more accessible and inclusive. Today's event is the culmination of hard work, dedication and commitment by many people from the transport agencies, voluntary welfare organisations and Government bodies. I am glad that my Ministry, through the Committee on Ageing Issues, was able to help in the process. I want to congratulate all involved on a job well done.

Inclusive Transport System

2 As Singapore is expected to face new challenges because of our ageing society, the Government agrees with the Committee on Ageing Issues that there is a need to ramp up our efforts now to create a more barrier-free living environment that will make Singapore a truly 'Accessible City'. Providing accessible transport is also essential if we want our seniors and people with disabilities to fully participate in everyday activities. Many of us may take for granted our easy access to, and participation in, everyday services - educational and leisure opportunities, work and recreation etc. If we think about it, we can understand that for some seniors and people with disabilities this is not as easy.

3 But what makes life even more challenging for some seniors and people with disabilities is that the very means of getting to work, educational establishments, leisure and other services, may itself be another barrier, especially if they cannot access transport services.

4 Consequently, I am honoured to be invited to launch the operation of the first ten wheelchair accessible buses (WAB) today. These buses will serve the needs of the mobility-challenged and wheelchair users. They will also benefit other groups such as families with young children in strollers.

Commendable People-Private-Public Partnership

5 The roll-out of the first wheelchair accessible buses on Service Route 21 is a tripartite effort between SBS Transit, the Land Transport Authority and voluntary welfare organisations. The buses on Route 21 will ply a number of housing estates, including Pasir Ris, Tampines, Bedok Reservoir, Geylang, Jalan Besar, Serangoon and Balestier. The buses will also pass by the premises of the Handicaps Welfare Association, and provide connection to Pasir Ris and Farrer Park MRT stations.

6 SBS Transit will be putting up the time schedules of the wheelchair accessible buses on its website so that passengers-in-wheelchair can plan their journeys ahead. To top it off, SBS Transit will give all passengers in wheelchairs one month's worth of free travel on their WAB service.

7 Moving forward, SBS Transit will roll out another 140 new low-floor, step-free double deck buses equipped with wheelchair accessible features, in consultation with LTA and the voluntary welfare organisations. But the hardware is only as good as the persons operating it. Towards this end, SBS Transit has committed resources to train more bus captains to operate the wheelchair ramps and to render assistance to passengers in wheelchairs.

8 The success of wheelchair accessible bus services also depends much on passengers in wheelchairs using these services and how members of the public take to the concept. Slight delays are bound to happen as boarding and alighting by passengers in wheelchair will take some time. I hope that the commuting public will be tolerant, patient and show care and concern to the less mobile members of our society with gestures like moving to the rear to make way for them.

9 Following today's launch, SBS Transit, LTA and the voluntary welfare organizations will embark on a public education programme to familiarise the public with the Wheelchair Accessible Bus. LTA will also be upgrading road facilities over the next three to four years to enhance its user-friendliness. These initiatives will ensure that the less mobile members of our society can traverse easily within their neighbourhoods. Ultimately, we want to make all HDB precincts barrier-free so that our seniors and the disabled can lead happy and meaningful lives amidst familiar surroundings, with their family and loved ones.

10 Providing genuinely accessible transport is fundamental to helping our seniors and people with disabilities enjoy the full richness of life. I want to thank SBS Transit, LTA and the VWOs in working closely together with the Government to bring about this new transport experience for our fellow Singaporeans.

Thank you.