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Disabled to have better access to buildings

Wider toilets, easy links to trains, bus stops are features of new design rules**By Tan Hui Yee**

ALL new buildings will soon be required to be more accessible to the elderly and the disabled as the authorities try to speed up changes while they review planning rules.

New apartments will need to have at least one toilet wide enough for wheelchair users and large enough for grab bars to be installed if needed.

The toilets need to be close to the same level as other parts of the apartment.

There will also have to be seamless routes between new buildings and neighbouring ones to make it easier for people with disabilities.

The requirements follow the Housing Board's earlier commitment to build all its flats with similar disabled and elderly-friendly features from July.

Developers who apply for approval from March next year will need to comply with the toilet regulations.

Those seeking approval from next month will have to ensure their building's design has seamless routes for wheelchair users travelling from neighbouring buildings or nearby facilities such as bus stops.

Owners of existing buildings undertaking major upgrading work will also be required to comply with these rules.

The new regulations were unveiled yesterday by Minister of National Development Mah Bow Tan at the launch of a guidebook on universal design, which allows a building to be used by the greatest number of people possible, regardless of their age or physical condition.

Providing such access should be the first principle of development rather than an after-thought, Mr Mah said.

Unfortunately, said the president of the Singapore Institute of Architects, Ms Rita Soh, many buildings do not have facilities for the disabled integrated with their overall design.

This means, for example, that ramps are located far away from the main entrances.

Currently, only about 20,000 of Singapore's approximately 120,000 buildings are accessible to the disabled.

To make the environment easier for the fast-ageing population, the Government is reviewing the Code on Barrier Free Accessibility in Buildings. This is expected to be completed next year.

The revised code aims to improve the linkages between buildings, as well as between buildings and other facilities such as train stations.

The Building and Construction Authority has drawn up a basic set of disabled-friendly features that could be provided by owners of existing buildings at a reasonable cost, of say a few thousand dollars.

For a start, it will be trying to persuade owners of buildings in high-traffic areas like Orchard Road, Bras Basah Road and Shenton Way to make their buildings more accessible in the next five years.

Meanwhile, a multi-agency government committee will help cut red tape if a building owner seeks to provide disabled access links that go beyond the property's boundary.

The efforts are part of a nationwide initiative to make the living environment more accessible. Among other measures, lifts that stop on every floor are being added to public housing blocks, while buses with low floors and no steps are being introduced.

The law will also be amended to ensure that facilities built for the disabled remain open for their use, to curb abuses like turning toilets for the disabled into storerooms.

Vice-president of the Handicaps Welfare Association Judy Wee said the elderly and disabled will not be the only ones who will benefit from changes. Those with 'hidden injuries' like hip or knee problems, for example, will find it easier to move around with these facilities in place.

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