

# SINGAPORE

## SBS Transit beats four rivals to bag Seletar bus contract again

Its winning bid of \$526m includes initiatives that would raise standards for industry: LTA

**Kok Yufeng**  
Transport Correspondent

Public bus services operating from Seletar bus depot, including 24, 70 and 130, will continue to be run by SBS Transit (SBST) until at least 2030.

The public transport operator on July 19 won the right to continue running a total of 29 bus routes under the Seletar bus package with a \$526 million bid.

This fee, which will be paid by the Land Transport Authority (LTA), is for a five-year contract, but it may be adjusted for factors

such as inflation, change in wage levels and fuel costs during the contract period.

Under the new contract, which will start from the first quarter of 2025, SBST will continue to manage bus interchanges in Ang Mo Kio and Yio Chu Kang too.

LTA said on July 19 that it has the option to extend the contract with SBST by between two and five years at the end of the five-year term.

SBST beat out two other bus operators here, SMRT Buses and Tower Transit Singapore. It also trumped two foreign bidders – Spain's Nex Continental Holdings

and a joint venture between Hong Kong public transport company Bravo Transport Holdings and British public transport firm Ascendal Group.

LTA said SBST received the highest total score after taking into account quality and price factors. The authority noted that SBST's proposal included initiatives that would raise standards for the public bus industry as a whole.

For instance, SBST said it will work with the Singapore Bus Academy to set up an electric bus training centre at Seletar bus depot to better prepare the public bus workforce for the transition to electric buses.

Singapore wants half of its public bus fleet to be electric by 2030. The new centre will adopt mixed-reality technology – which

blends views of the real world with digital content – for training, LTA said.

SBST also proposed rolling out a bus service tailored to young school-going children, as well as a virtual assistant at bus interchanges that can translate spoken and written words into sign language so passengers who are hard of hearing can get help with their travel queries.

LTA said both initiatives are now being trialled at Ang Mo Kio bus interchange.

Singapore's public bus system uses a contracting model, which means operators bid for contracts and are paid a fee by LTA to run the services. The bus routes, and the accompanying depots and interchanges, are bundled by geographic area.

There are 14 such bus packages today.

The Seletar package was first put up for tender in 2016, and SBST won the bid in 2018 with a \$480 million bid. This earlier contract was then extended by two years until 2025.

In October 2023, LTA called a new tender for the Seletar package, which drew five bidders.

The Bravo Transport-Ascendal Group joint venture put in the highest bid at \$612 million, followed by SMRT Buses at \$577 million and Nex Continental at \$560 million.

SMRT Buses also put in a lower alternative bid of \$550 million. Similarly, SBST put in a \$542 million "base" bid and an alternative \$526 million bid that ultimately won.

As for Tower Transit Singapore, its three bids – a \$540 million "base" bid, and \$523 million and \$520 million alternatives – were all unsuccessful.

LTA said the tender submissions were evaluated using a two-envelope process, which means they were first evaluated based on quality before the price submissions were looked at.

SBST's group chief executive Jeffrey Sim said the company is pleased to have been awarded the Seletar contract for a second consecutive term, and expressed appreciation for LTA's continued trust.

He said SBST passengers can

look forward to better service, noting the various new initiatives that the operator intends to introduce.

In addition to the electric bus training centre and virtual assistant, Mr Sim said SBST will set up a public transport inclusiveness training centre so bus drivers and the public can learn how to assist vulnerable commuters through experiential learning.

Separately, National Transport Workers' Union executive secretary Melvin Yong said in a Facebook post that SBST winning the Seletar bus package tender meant minimal changes for the roughly 800 employees who would have been impacted.

"We do not expect any significant challenges for this transition," said Mr Yong, who is also Member of Parliament for Radin Mas.

"The union will work closely with SBST to ensure that all affected workers will have a smooth transition," he added.

Associate Professor Raymond Ong, a transport infrastructure researcher at the National University of Singapore, said SBST being the incumbent means it already has the necessary experience to run the Seletar bus services.

He added: "I think it is the comprehensiveness of the proposal that hit the nail on the head. It is not just price and quality, but also the community and industry engagement and support."

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## TTSH makes frail, senior patients key priority as it celebrates 180 years

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With growing numbers of seniors visiting its busy emergency department (ED), Tan Tock Seng Hospital (TTSH) said a key priority is to look out for frail, senior patients, some of whom are at risk of readmission after they have been discharged.

These patients, aged 65 and above, are flagged to the hospital's geriatric team so that they can receive help to better manage their symptoms.

This helps them lead better lives and stay out of hospital as much as possible.

Frailty is a common geriatric syndrome characterised by diminished strength, endurance and physiologic reserves.

The hospital's chief executive, Dr Tang Kong Choong, told The Straits Times ahead of celebrations to mark its 180th anniversary that TTSH has made a concerted effort to ensure that staff know to direct attention and care to the frail and elderly as Singapore rapidly ages.

TTSH ramped up efforts to detect frail, senior patients in its ED in 2022, following disruptions caused by the Covid-19 pandemic in previous years.

At the hospital's 180th anniversary bash on July 19 at Capitol Theatre, President Tharman Shanmugaratnam said that TTSH has always been a people's hospital.

"It was started by the community and has remained faithful to its founding ethos of being close to the community and caring for the community," said President Tharman.

TTSH was founded as the Chinese Pauper Hospital in 1844 by philanthropist Tan Tock Seng, who had a deep desire to help the sick and poor.

Today, it is one of the largest tertiary hospitals in Singapore, with 1,400 acute care beds. It is also home to Singapore's busiest ED.

In 2023, about 43 per cent of the 134,000 ED attendances involved patients who were 65 and over, up from 41 per cent in 2022.

Half of the patients in this age group are likely to have some level of frailty.



A local cast, including staff of Tan Tock Seng Hospital (TTSH), putting on a musical at the hospital's 180th anniversary bash on July 19 at Capitol Theatre. The musical was inspired by real-life stories about TTSH and its staff's dedication to improving the healthcare landscape in Singapore. PHOTO: LIANHE ZHAOBAO

Patients within that age group also accounted for nearly 62.8 per cent of TTSH's total admissions in 2023, up from 61.6 per cent in 2022.

Their readmission numbers have also risen.

Data provided by TTSH showed that, in 2023, some 11.8 per cent of TTSH inpatients aged 65 and above were admitted to the hospital more than twice in a year.

In 2022, the figure was 11.1 per cent, and in 2021, it was 9.8 per cent.

Dr Tang said that TTSH not only addresses the primary conditions of elderly patients, but also extends care to their overall well-being, such as looking into the patients' nutrition and oral health, if needed.

"That has helped us to anticipate their needs and address them ear-

lier and... try to reduce their length of stay in the hospital," said Dr Tang.

The hospital works on the discharge plan early in the admission process to make sure the patient has home care arrangements.

TTSH is surrounded by mature housing estates such as Ang Mo Kio and Toa Payoh, where the proportion of senior residents aged 65 and above is higher than the na-

tional average of some 17 per cent, reaching 24.3 per cent in Ang Mo Kio and 21.7 per cent in Toa Payoh.

"The whole journey for us, in terms of managing frail and old patients, began years ago... So, we have been preparing ourselves," said Dr Tang, alluding to TTSH's work in geriatric medicine, which focuses on providing care for the

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# Chan: S'poreans can be a bridge among different cultures in fragmented world

Minister urges students to go beyond festivals and food, and understand other races better

Taryn Ng

Speaking to an Indian patron lining up for carrot cake, a hawker makes an off-colour remark that all Indians like the dish fried up extra dark – cooked with more dark soya sauce.

Would this qualify as casual racism?

Some first-year students from St Andrew's Junior College (SAJC) thought so and said it was racist for the hawker to hold such assumptions.

The issues of racism and racial harmony were topics of discussion during the students' weekly character and citizenship education lesson on July 19.

One student said making generalisations about people of the same race was racist, while another student pointed out that making such comments gave the impression that racist remarks were acceptable.

Sitting in on their lesson was Education Minister Chan Chun Sing, who quizzed students to think deeper about their responses.

"If I say anything related to your skin tone, is that casual racism? People can make all kinds of remarks, but when does it cross the line?" asked Mr Chan, who was visiting SAJC as part of Racial Harmony Day.

Second Minister for Education Maliki Osman, Minister of State for Education and Manpower Gan Siow Huang and Senior Parliamentary Secretary for Education and Finance Shawn Huang also visited different schools.

At his visit to SAJC, Mr Chan said people have a tendency to profile others based on their race, and to also be around people who are from the same ethnic background.

Over time, this leads to pigeonholing and the development of racial stereotypes, he said.

During the hour-long lesson, the class of 24 students discussed in small groups topics including casual racism, the significance of wearing ethnic attire, and celebrating

festivals.

Mr Chan pushed students to think about the importance of racial harmony. He asked them whether they thought lessons like these were important, which led some students to point to the race riots in the 1960s.

"Many of you talked about the racial riots in the past, but you've never experienced it in your life. And you're also not very sure if you will ever experience it, so that sounds rather distant, right?" he said.

He told students that Singapore's racial harmony was based on the different races embracing their own cultural roots, with each race appreciating diversity, while trying to build something common to all Singaporeans.

The challenge, he said, is building a future and ethos shared with Singaporeans of all races.

"If we want to achieve this, then we have to deeply understand and respect each other's pasts, each other's differences, (and go) beyond ethnic costumes, beyond festivals, beyond (our) food," he said.

Key to this is developing a deep understanding of the cultures of other races, he said. If Singaporeans can do that, they can be a bridge among different cultures in what is an increasingly fragmented world, he said.



Education Minister Chan Chun Sing sitting in on a character and citizenship education lesson on July 19 at St Andrew's Junior College, which he visited for Racial Harmony Day. ST PHOTO: GIN TAY

Asked about the minister's comments after class, JCI student Xa-

vier Lee said racial harmony is an idealistic but achievable goal.

Lessons like these were a good starting point for students and helped inform him about the importance of racial harmony, said

the 18-year-old.

"When you participate in other cultures, you can see the differences and learn to appreciate them."

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## New fund to pioneer new ways of care

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unique health needs of seniors. Singapore's first geriatric medicine department was set up in TTSH 36 years ago at the end of 1988, when the country realised that its demographic situation was changing profoundly.

Looking ahead, the hospital is not just focusing on better care for frail, senior patients, but also looking at pioneering new ways of care.

TTSH said on July 19 that it will mark its 180th anniversary by setting up a new Health For Generations fund that aims to raise \$18 million over five years to support developments in key areas such as innovation and preventive healthcare, as well as population health research projects.

Dr Tang said the hospital hopes to soon start Health4All@Toa Payoh – a project that will enrol and track 4,000 Toa Payoh residents aged 35 to 70 over five years to understand the psycho-social and environmental factors influencing their health.

Mr Tharman mentioned the fund in his speech, saying that the results will hopefully lead to personalised solutions for improved health literacy and self-care, with community support.

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