SkillsFuture, Housing, CPF to take Centre Stage in COS Debate

Kelly Ng
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Singapore — Issues concerning the new SkillsFuture initiative, Central Provident Fund (CPF) recommendations and housing policies are set to receive the most airtime in the Committee of Supply (COS) debates scheduled to kick off tomorrow (March 5), after Deputy Prime Minister Tharman Shanmugaratnam wraps up the Budget debate.

Members of Parliament (MPs) have filed 436 “cuts”, typically a question or suggestion on a ministry’s programmes and policies. The Manpower Ministry (MOM) received the highest number of cuts (53), followed by the National Development Ministry and the Ministry of Culture, Community and Youth (MCCY), with 46 and 38 cuts, respectively.

MPs who file cuts call for a nominal S$100 reduction in a ministry’s budget, and use the opportunity to express their views on the programmes of each ministry. The minister and other office holders then respond, after which an MP withdraws his cut if he is satisfied with the reply.

Topics set to dominate the MOM debate include ensuring quality outcomes and industry relevance in SkillsFuture courses, upskilling mature workers and retirement adequacy of CPF.

The MND debate will centre on housing policies such as home ownership for minority groups, such as single parents and rental flat tenants. The MCCY debate will feature a wide range of topics from heritage conservation, support for the Malay-Muslim community and sporting talent and facilities.

Chua Chu Kang MP Zaqy Mohamad plans to question the MOM on its plans for executing the recommendations revealed last month by the CPF Advisory Panel. “There must be more communication on the ground to simplify and educate CPF members on what these recommendations mean,” he added.

Mr Zaqy, who filed three cuts for the MOM debate, will also propose that employers co-fund the SkillsFuture Credit — a S$500 credit given to Singaporeans aged 25 and above for education and training — and ask for an update on fair employment practices.

Mr Zainal Sapari (Pasir Ris-Punggol GRC) said he would call for more assistance for low-wage workers, such as by raising the quantum and lowering the eligibility age of the Workfare Income Supplement.

Meanwhile, Mr Gan Thiam Poh (Pasir Ris-Punggol GRC), who filed the highest number of cuts (six) for the MND debate, will propose, among other things, a waiver of the income ceiling for married couples looking to buy Housing and Development Board flats.
Political analysts and sociologists TODAY spoke to said there were “no surprises” in the topics that are set to dominate, which they say generally reflects Singaporeans’ perennial concerns, such as retirement adequacy and support for vulnerable groups.

MPs recognise their role to request information on behalf of their constituents, especially for policy changes that require better articulation, such as CPF changes, said Singapore Management University law professor Eugene Tan.

National University of Singapore (NUS) sociologist Tan Ern Ser, however, noted the emergence of non-bread-and-butter issues, such as heritage, being raised.

Both professors also noted that healthcare, a hot-button topic last year, will take a backseat during this year’s debates. Last year, the Health Ministry received the highest number of cuts (47) out of 449 filed, on topics related to sustainable healthcare planning, medical cost increases, MediShield Life and the ageing population.

“Perhaps, the Pioneer Generation Package and the soon-to-be-implemented MediShield Life have reduced their anxieties somewhat,” said Associate Professor Tan Ern Ser.

Fellow NUS sociologist Paulin Straughan, however, said she had expected more cuts on eldercare.

“Eldercare will be a big thing in the coming years and I don’t think we are adequately prepared for it. Infrastructural support to encourage ageing in place is a real national concern that requires budget,” said Associate Professor Straughan, a former Nominated MP.

The COS debates are expected to wrap up on Friday next week.