

singapore

Engineer develops tool to tackle homebuying woes

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SINGAPORE — For months, a young couple tried to make sense of an overwhelming amount of information online as they searched for a Housing and Development Board (HDB) resale flat to buy.

Starting in August, Mr Leow Hua Sheng, 28, a radar engineer at DSO National Laboratories, took a month to develop HDBSensemake. The visualisation tool allows homebuyers to determine a reasonable sum to pay for a resale flat in any given area.

With the tool, Mr Leow and his fiancee Alicia Loi Siew Ting, 28, managed to narrow their search to four PropertyGuru listings - one at Depot Road, one at Queen's Close, one at Jalan Bukit Merah and another in the Telok Blangah area. Their ideal home is a four- or five-room flat close to the city centre that costs S\$500,000 to S\$700,000.

The couple's homebuying journey, which began in May, continues but HDBSensemake came in third on Thursday (Oct 12) in the Open category of OneMap Ideaworks! competition. Organised by the Singapore Land Authority, students, the public, technologists and data scientists were given three months from July to find geospatial solutions to about 70 challenges issued by more than 30 government and community agencies.

Mr Leow's entry was the only one out of 22 that emerged from his own challenge statement – how a first-time homebuyer could get a "rational" estimate of a resale flat's price.

He collated data on HDB resale transaction prices through data.gov.sg and mapped them on a geospatial visualisation platform called Carto.

He took a month to develop the tool, which enables users to view the age and resale prices of units of an area they hover a mouse over. Users can also narrow their search based on flat type and their preferred price and age range.

He has no plans to commercialise the tool, but said the government could make use of it to nudge homebuyers to make more rational decisions – trawling through the data, he had found a non-linear relationship between the remaining years of lease left for flats and their per-square-foot prices.

Law and Home Affairs Minister K Shanmugam, who handed out prizes to the awardees on Thursday, said geospatial technologies shape the way people live, work and play. "We've got to move society forward by becoming a nation that plugs in into an international movement that is taking place. We don't want to be left behind," he said.

