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'Hackathon' to help keep Singapore clean and green

NEA brainstorming session to seek ideas from wide range of people
David Ee Straits Times 13 Apr 13;

THEY are normally the preserve of computer programmers and Mark Zuckerberg geek-types, who gather en masse to create exciting new software.

But now the National Environment Agency (NEA) is getting in on the act by holding its own "hackathon" from April 26 to 28.

Its brainstorming session, dubbed The Clean and Green Hackathon, will involve participants trying to come up with environmental solutions for Singapore - rather than having them come directly from the authorities.

They will pitch their ideas and form teams, before hunkering down for up to 12 hours each day over the weekend. Winners will be announced on the final day of the event.

Billed by the NEA as "a celebration of collaboration and innovation", the free event at the National University of Singapore aims to attract not only scientists and environmentalists, but also architects, web developers, programmers and other citizens.

An NEA spokesman said that the agency intends to "solicit good ideas for apps that can help track, monitor and protect the environment" through the event.

It already utilises them, such as its myENV app, which gives real-time information on rainfall and air quality.

The Government appears to be recognising the benefit that such consultations can bring to policymaking.

Last June, the Economic Development Board supported a hackathon that explored ideas ranging from how to save water to how to reduce stress.

Some 250 people attended.

Earlier this month, the Environment and Water Resources Ministry organised a Partners' Forum to hear views on issues from saving the hawker trade to how to curb dengue.

Clean & Green participants will be asked to consider whether technologies such as mobile apps, social media and smart devices can help people change their mindsets and embrace greener living.

And if they cannot, how else Singaporeans can be inspired to "commit to better (green) habits".

Other topics include urban issues such as waste management, energy usage and air quality. The NEA will provide participants with data on each of these.

Information architect Debbie Ding, 28, who has attended hackathons before, said that for them to be effective, they have to have focused themes, detailed data and the "right mix" of people interested in sharing

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ideas.

"A hackathon is limited by the datasets it receives," she said.

Sustainability consultant Eugene Tay, 35, said that putting programmers and environmentalists in the same room could help lead to new mobile apps, for example, one to help people locate recycling bins in malls and along shopping streets.

He expressed doubts whether people would give up their weekend to take part but said that the Government should continue its recent trend of discussing policymaking with citizens.

Said bookstore owner Kenny Leck, 35: "It has to be an ongoing conversation, part and parcel of what they do, 365 days a year."

For more information, visit http://cgs.sg/hackathon

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