

Letterhead of S.O.S. Save Our Shorelines!

*A coalition of concerned individuals who cherish the
beauty of Hong Kong's remaining natural shorelines*

5 July 2001

Members of Transport Panel
Hong Kong Legislative Council
8 Jackson Road
Hong Kong

Dear Members of the Transport Panel,

Re: Rail for Southern Hong Kong -Viable & Desirable

We tried to dispel the common misconceptions about Route 7 (R7) in our last letter to legislators. We hope the information was useful. Transport Bureau (TB) announced its plan for R7 on 3 July and has provided you with an explanatory paper. Despite the recent modifications to the design of R7, we still maintain that rail is the right transport answer to Western and Southern Hong Kong.

We also wish to emphasize that R7 will destroy the Planning Department's vision for the development of Southern Hong Kong Island, as per its "Garden of the Metropolitan Area" vision now being put forward for public consultation.

In this letter, we would like to discuss the advantages of an alternative South Island Line (SIL) and how it can be financed. TB claims that rail is too expensive. It is not. To build rail now, all that is required is for the Government to change its mindset.

1. Rail is NOT more expensive than R7

Our own study shows that there are two options for a medium capacity rail. The SIL could run from:

- (i) Admiralty to Aberdeen and Ap Lei Chau with a spur line to Cyberport, OR
- (ii) Sheung Wan via Cyberport, Wah Fu, Ap Lei Chau, Ocean Park in a circle and back to Wanchai or Admiralty.

Our estimates show that Option (i) would cost around HK\$7-8 billion and Option (ii) around HK\$9-10 billion. Most of the construction cost, along with all operation and maintenance costs, would be met by fares and property development opportunities, not taxpayers' money as would be the case for R7.

By our calculation, TB's scaled down dual lane R7 is likely to cost taxpayers HK\$7-8 billion. We are surprised that TB chose not to give an indication of the cost involved in their Briefing

Paper to the Legislative Council since it should know. This sum is similar to Option (i) for rail. None of this cost will be recaptured through user charges.

2. How to finance rail

The amount of direct government support for a SIL would be much less than the outlay for the scaled down R7. The amount of direct government support needed to make rail viable would probably be less than HK\$4 billion.

In other words, if the Government provided between HK\$3 - \$4 billion to a rail operator, the SIL would be otherwise fully financially viable. Put in another way, for less than 50% of the unrecoverable government cost for R7, Hong Kong can be served by a SIL.

In contrast, if the Government pushes ahead with spending HK\$7-8 billion for R7, it will make a rail line highly uneconomic in the future although TB said it had not ruled it out. TB is being disingenuous in making such a claim.

Furthermore, we believe that TB will extend R7 to Aberdeen in the future. We believe that TB has proposed building it only to Pokfulum now in order to minimize public objections but in a couple of years, it will propose building the full length as originally envisaged for R7.

3. Benefits of Rail

- **Cost:** Less than half the cost to taxpayers than R7 and with more benefits.
- **Speed:** Passengers could reliably travel from Aberdeen to Admiralty in about 10 minutes in contrast to much more variable and often much longer times via R7.
- **Congestion:** R7 would seriously add to congestion in Central. Rail would lessen congestion.
- **Pollution:** Rail will produce less air and noise pollution. R7 will bring more vehicles into the area.
- **Safety:** R7 could result in at least 30 deaths and 200 serious injuries over 10 years. Rail is a safer option.
- **Shoreline:** Despite tunnelling through Mt Davis and putting the stretch at Cyberport underground, when R7 is build beyond Cyberport, it will ruin the shoreline beyond that. Rail will avoid destroying the shoreline.

- **Amenities:** Allow shoreline development for amenity uses, such as bicycle paths, promenades, outdoor cafes, and sitting out areas.
- **Property:** Values (along with returns to the Government) would be improved by rail.
- **Equity:** More people will benefit from rail.

4. Rail is more fair to more people

Our estimates show that a railway will have far greater capacity (perhaps double) that of R7. An SIL can accommodate 150,000 to 300,000 passengers a day compared to 150,000 for the full R7. It is that simple - far more people will benefit with rail.

Further, unlike R7, which will primarily serve those in private cars and taxis, rail will serve a much wider range of the community.

By building rail, a large proportion of the passenger traffic can be diverted thereby freeing up road capacity on Pokfulam Road and Victoria Road. The extent to which people will ride rail rather than use cars or taxis will depend largely on the speed and reliability when comparing road and rail. Central is already highly congested, so travel time is variable. R7 will add to traffic problem in Central. At peak travelling times, rail is going to be more reliable.

TB's own traffic estimates for R7 show that most of the users will be private cars and taxis. In 2016, 70% of passengers will be in cars and taxis. Only 18% of vehicles using R7 will be goods vehicles. This means that even according to TB's own estimate, R7 is not really needed for moving goods.

5. Cyberport needs rail

Cyberport will have a shopping mall of about 300,000 square feet. It is planned to be a retail showcase of an interesting array of IT and other products. To ensure that the Cyberport is easily reachable, we understand that potential international and leading local retail tenants would want a rail link. The Government has an interest to see Cyberport do well since taxpayers' money has been invested in the project. It is hard to understand why the TB is resisting rail in preference to a less optimal R7.

6. *Transport Department working at cross purposes with Planning Department*

The Planning Department has greatly reduced the future populations increase planned for in Southern Hong Kong Island and has designed the area as the "Garden of the Metropolitan Area". This has several important implications.

Firstly, the number of people commuting each day from this area into Central and Kowloon will be less than originally projected, but travel demands will be higher than originally expected during off peak hours as local residents from other parts of Hong Kong (along with tourists) visit this area for recreational purposes. A rail option would serve such visitors far better than a road. Secondly, rail would leave the shoreline along Sandy Bay free for future amenity use. While R7 would forever destroy this potential.

What this comes down to is that if Southern Hong Kong Island is to become a resource for the whole of Hong Kong (as envisioned by the Planning Department), then the loss in environmental and amenity value associated with R7 would be borne by the whole of Hong Kong not just the people living in the area. Added to the financial imprudence of pushing for R7 versus rail (see 3 above) this makes R7 a wrong policy of truly massive proportions.

7. Conclusion

Our research shows that R7 is not the best option to relieve congestion. Existing roads and current improvements provide sufficient capacity for some more years, which allows for time to build a SIL, which will benefit the whole of Hong Kong.

A rail option is in line with the Government's own goals to provide rail-led transport. We wish to quote from TB's own study, the Comprehensive Transport Study CTS3:

"... simply building more roads is not a solution as the corresponding increase in traffic will put additional pressure on the environment" and "railway will form the backbone of the future passenger transport network".

So far this assertion has been only an empty promise (the government propose to spend far more on roads in the coming 15 years than on rail (and indeed to build several times more kilometres of road than rail). Southern Hong Kong Islands presents an excellent opportunity for the Government to move beyond rhetoric to action.

We would be more than happy to meet and discuss details of our findings with you should you find it useful.

Yours sincerely,

Christine Loh
Chairperson