

LegCo Question No. 20

(Written Reply)

Date of sitting: 28 November 2001

Asked by: Hon Emily Lau

Replied by: Secretary for Security

Question

On 14 November this year, the Secretary for Security informed this Council that the 24-hour provision of cross-boundary passenger clearance remained a long-term objective of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region. In view of the fact that the issue has never been discussed in this Council, will the Executive Authorities inform this Council:

- (a) how the Administration has come to the conclusion that the above arrangement is a long-term objective;
- (b) whether the Administration has assessed the economic, social and transportation implications of the implementation of 24-hour operation at land boundary control points; if so, of the details of the assessment; and
- (c) whether and when the Administration intends to consult the public on this issue?

Reply

Madam President,

- (a) The conclusion that the 24-hour provision of cross-boundary passenger clearance should remain a long-term objective was

reached following close consultations between Hong Kong and Mainland authorities and careful balancing of a multitude of factors.

Both Hong Kong and the Mainland see the gradual extension of the operating hours for cross-boundary passenger clearance as a natural development in view of the close social and economic ties as well as increasing flow of people between the two places. Both sides recognize that the further extension of operating hours in a gradual manner would eventually lead to 24-hour clearance, and have accordingly agreed that this should be adopted as a common long-term goal. The pace at which this long-term goal is to be achieved depends on a careful balance of all the factors at play, including practical needs, the interests of the peoples of the two sides, efficient use of resources as well as socio-economic considerations.

Against the above background, the two sides agreed at the 4th Plenary of the Hong Kong/Guangdong Cooperation Joint Conference on 25 July 2001 that, as an immediate measure, the operating hours at Lowu should be extended for 30 minutes on the day before and during a Hong Kong Public Holiday. Also, as a mid-term measure, the extension should apply daily and the operating hours at Lok Ma Chau should be aligned with those at Lo Wu. The immediate measures are already in place and have operated smoothly during recent Mid-Autumn/National Day and Chung Yeung Festival holidays. The mid-term measures will be implemented with effect from 1 December 2001, when the Control Points at both Lo Wu and Lok Ma Chau will operate from 6:30 am

to 12:00 midnight.

We would closely monitor the situation following the implementation of the mid-term measures, and consider the timing and extent of further extension taking into account all relevant factors, and in the light of consultations with Mainland authorities.

- (b) The Administration's preliminary assessment of the economic, social and transportation aspects of 24-hour cross-boundary passenger clearance is set out below. Since 24-hour passenger clearance is a long-term goal, the Administration will need to update its assessment in light of the implementation of the mid-term and any further extension measures:

- Economically, further extension of cross-boundary passenger clearance to up to 24 hours will facilitate freer flow of people and services and is likely to be conducive to the growth of commercial and business ties between the two places and further strengthen the role of Hong Kong as a major services centre in South China. On the other hand, the prospect of some negative impact on certain specific sectors such as retail and property prices in areas close to the boundary cannot be ruled out, although such impact would only be temporary and is likely to be outweighed by the benefits to the overall economy. In addition, the extent of any negative impact may also vary depending on the number and choice of control points providing 24-hour cross-boundary clearance. Careful handling is required.

- There is no consensus on the social implications of 24-hour cross-boundary passenger clearance and the issues involved are wide-ranging and complex. For example, some people are worried that the increased convenience resulting from longer passenger clearance hours could pose risks to family unity as Hong Kong people might find it easier to develop extra-marital relationship across the border, whilst some dismiss this as far-fetched. Our preliminary view is that provided that we do it in a gradual and incremental manner, in accordance with the approach adopted by the two sides in dealing with this question, the community should be able to adjust over time so that the fabric of our society will not be adversely affected.
- From a transportation angle, 24-hour passenger clearance in itself will not help much to solve the problems of congestion at our Control Points since the number of people crossing the boundary in the unsocial hours is unlikely to be substantial. In the final analysis, the solution lies in expanding the capacity of our control points to deal with peak hour passenger traffic and in building more cross-boundary facilities at appropriate locations and supporting them with adequate transportation infrastructure. With this in mind, we are expanding existing facilities at both Lowu and Lok Ma Chau and proceeding at full steam with the construction of the Shenzhen Western Corridor and the Lok Ma Chau Spur Line, which we aim to complete in

2005 and in 2006/2007 respectively.

- (c) The issue of 24-hour opening of our boundary control points has been widely discussed by different sectors of the community for some time and public views on the subject are divergent. A diversity of views have been expressed and the Administration are fully aware of them. The Administration will continue to take careful note of views from all walks of life expressed through various channels.