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18 January 2002

Clerk to Panel
(Attn.: Ms Alice Au)
Legislative Council Panel on Transport
Legislative Council Secretariat
Legislative Council Building
8 Jackson Road, Central
Hong Kong

Dear Ms Au,

LegCo Panel on Transport
Meeting on 14 December 2001

Thank you for your letter dated 15 December 2001 referring to us five submissions from associations of the public light bus (PLB) trade. Our comments on the issues raised in the submissions are set out below.

Policy on PLBs and Restrictions on RMB Operation

Our paper on “Review of the Operation of Public Light Buses” issued to the Panel in December 2001 has explained in detail the background and rationale of the Government's policy on PLBs, including the role and function of PLBs and the restrictions on the operation of red minibuses (RMBs). In gist, the primary function of PLBs is to supplement the mass carriers. In particular green minibuses (GMBs) would provide connecting services to railway stations or public transport interchanges and serve areas where patronage cannot sustain the provision of services by high capacity carriers. PLBs are encouraged to operate scheduled services in the form of GMBs through conversion from RMBs.

Transport Department (TD) would, within the framework of the policy on PLBs, consider requests for relaxing the stopping restrictions or the restrictions on the operation of RMBs on a case-by-case basis. For example, after having carefully examined suggestions from some Panel members and the trade to allow PLBs to use the Tai Lam Tunnel, TD has decided to introduce GMB services through the tunnel. TD is also assessing the feasibility of allowing RMBs to operate on the New Territories-bound section of Tuen Mun Road between Tsuen Wan and Sham Tseng during the period when the road widening works on Castle Peak Road between Tsuen Wan West and Ka Lung Tsuen are in progress. TD will continue to consider any other specific proposals to relax the current restrictions on RMB operation on the merits of each case.

Role of Resident's Service

As regards resident's service (RS), their role will continue to be supplementary in the public transport system, primarily to help reduce the peak-hour demand for franchised bus and GMB services where they are inadequate. Applications to operate RS services will be considered carefully by TD, taking into account the relevant factors which include the need for the services to be provided by the applicant, the level of service already provided or planned by other public transport operators, and traffic conditions in the areas and on the roads where the services are to be provided. Unauthorised operation of RS service will continue to be dealt with through appropriate enforcement actions.

Measures to improve PLB operation

We have been taking/examining a number of improvement measures to assist the PLB trade. As explained in the paper on "Review of the Operation of Public Light Buses", these measures include promoting GMB services in private residential development, exploring possible rail-GMB interchange schemes, helping the trade to develop and implement service adjustments for GMBs to improve efficiency, facilitating initiatives by PLB operators to increase their indirect sources of income, introducing measures to improve the

quality and image of PLB services, and considering designation of more PLB drop-off points and permission for parking of RMBs at PLB stands at specified points.

On the suggestion to relax the weight limit of PLBs, we wish to advise that legislative amendments are being proposed to relax the existing weight limit to 5 tonnes, in order to harmonize it with the relevant international standards and enable new in-vehicle safety and service improvement features such as seat-belts, high seat backs and Octopus fare collection system etc. to be introduced.

Concerning the proposal to exempt diesel duty for PLBs, the Administration has proposed an incentive scheme to encourage the conversion of diesel light buses to more environmentally friendly vehicles, e.g. liquefied petroleum gas (LPG) light buses. Since no duty is charged on LPG fuel used by vehicles, this should help the operation of PLBs. On the other hand, the proposal will reduce Government's revenue and hence will adversely affect the public finance. The Government has no plan to pursue the proposal.

Yours sincerely,

(Ms Louise Leung)
for Secretary for Transport

c.c. C for T (Attn. : Mr Daniel Au)