

LEGISLATIVE COUNCIL PANEL ON TRANSPORT

REVIEW OF THE OPERATION OF PUBLIC LIGHT BUSES

PURPOSE

At the meeting of Legislative Council (LegCo) Panel on Transport held on 15 December 2000, the Administration briefed the Panel on the existing policy on public light buses (PLBs). In response to the concerns expressed by members at the meeting, the Administration has reviewed the operation of PLBs. This paper informs members of our views and sets out the measures which will be undertaken or examined by the Administration to help the PLB trade.

BACKGROUND

2. With the rapid development of high capacity carriers, PLBs has been performing a supplementary role in the provision of public transport services. The Government's policy is to limit their total number and maintain their level of activities. In gist -

- (a) the PLB fleet has been frozen at 4,350 since 1976 by an order of the Executive Council which was extended from time to time through resolutions made by the LegCo;
- (b) PLBs are encouraged to operate scheduled services in the form of green minibuses (GMBs) through conversion from red minibuses (RMBs). GMBs may operate in new towns and on expressways; and
- (c) RMBs may operate in existing service areas but not in new towns or new housing developments, and there are restrictions on RMBs using expressways.

3. The limitation order was last extended by LegCo in June 2001 for five years. At present, there is a total of 2,448 GMBs (about 56% of the PLB fleet) which operate on 327 scheduled routes, and 1,902 RMBs which operate on about 140 flexible routes. Together they carry 1.63 million passenger trips per day. Compared with last year, there is an increase of about 4% in the GMB fleet through more conversion from RMBs and over 2% increase in the daily patronage.

ROLE AND FUNCTION OF PLBs

4. The policy on PLBs was reviewed and reaffirmed by the Transport Advisory Committee in its 1997 PLB Policy Review. In terms of the role and function of PLBs, the report pointed out that -

- (a) the primary function of PLBs to supplement the mass carriers should be maintained, in particular GMBs should play an important role in linking up new towns and villages with railway stations and bus terminals, and in providing services to areas where patronage does not justify the provision of high capacity modes or where bus services are not economical or constrained by road terrain;
- (b) RMBs are not allowed to operate in new towns because apart from being less efficient road users, their aggressive manner of stopping and waiting for passengers at kerbside and at road junctions is one of the main causes of traffic congestion;
- (c) local stopping restrictions should continue to be imposed to relieve traffic problems caused by RMB activities; and
- (d) it is desirable to convert more RMBs to GMBs.

5. The Comprehensive Transport Study-3 Report published in October 1999 also reaffirmed that the numbers and role of PLBs should be maintained, and that the conversion of more RMBs to the GMBs should continue to be encouraged.

6. The factors for confining PLBs to a supplementary role are still applicable today, particularly in view of the substantial development and improvement in the public transport system.

7. In order to ensure efficient use of the limited road space, any need to increase the capacity of the public transport system should preferably be met by enhancing the carrying capacity of the mass carriers (i.e. railways and franchised buses) where appropriate. To meet public expectation of an efficient, reliable and environmentally friendly transport system, railways will be used as the major transport mode and inter-modal coordination will need to be improved. In pursuance of these policy considerations, there has been a marked improvement in the network of the mass carriers over the past years, and there is an ambitious plan to expand further the railway network. In view of these developments, PLBs should continue to perform a supplementary role in the public transport system.

OPERATION OF PLBs

Stopping restriction

8. In view of the road congestion problem in Hong Kong, and the continued plan to encourage RMB conversion into GMB, there is no material change in circumstances which warrant a general relaxation in the existing restrictions on RMB operation. Priority on the use of road space should continue to be accorded to the mass carriers.

9. On the other hand, in order to help the RMB trade and facilitate passengers, Transport Department (TD) would, on a case-by-case basis, apply these restrictions with flexibility and develop ways to accommodate conflicting kerbside activities. We would consider -

- (a) introducing picking up/setting down hatch markings with 'no waiting' warning signs in more places; and
- (b) relaxing PLB urban clearway restrictions at the less busy areas at specified periods if feasible.

Tai Lam Tunnel

10. We have considered the request to allow RMBs to use Tai Lam Tunnel having regard to the role and function of PLBs as outlined above. Given the continued improvement to public transport services in the New Territories and the plan to commence the operation of West Rail in 2003, which will provide a significant amount of additional transport capacity to the Yuen Long/Tsuen Wan corridor, there is no general shortage of supply of public transport services to meet passenger demand in the areas concerned.

11. Besides, opening up the Tai Lam Tunnel to RMB operation would not be consistent with the policy objective of encouraging the conversion of RMBs to operate scheduled services in the form of GMBs. TD would monitor the service demand and supply situation along this corridor. In the event that there are specific demands that the rail or franchised bus network are unable to meet, introduction of GMB services through the Tai Lam Tunnel would be considered.

12. In the light of the above considerations, the Administration does not consider it appropriate to relax the existing ban on RMB operation through the Tai Lam Tunnel.

13. There have been suggestions by some sectors of the RMB

trade to review the existing prohibition on RMB operation on Tuen Mun Road as a measure to help the trade under the current economic climate. We are studying the proposal taking into account the general policy on PLBs, as well as traffic conditions, passenger demand, and impact on other transport modes.

14. Currently, Castle Peak Road serves as the main route for the RMBs plying between Tsuen Wan and the North West New Territories. Road widening works have just commenced on the section of Castle Peak Road between Tsuen Wan West and Ka Lung Tsuen with completion scheduled for 2005. TD is assessing the feasibility of allowing RMBs to operate on the New Territories-bound section of Tuen Mun Road between Tsuen Wan and Sham Tseng to provide RMBs with an alternative route to Castle Peak Road during the period when the works are in progress. However, the opening of this section of Tuen Mun Road to RMBs may add pressure to the slip roads at Sham Tseng Interchange and there are concerns about potential problems on road safety arising from the driving behaviour of some RMB drivers. TD will examine these issues carefully in considering the matter.

Measures to promote GMB services

15. TD has been taking measures to assist the GMB trade to develop its feeder role. In the past years, the network of GMB feeder services has expanded from 146 routes involving about 1,140 GMBs to 155 routes involving about 1,220 GMBs.

16. Other measures to promote GMB services include -

- (i) promote GMB services in private residential development. Special features such as vehicle livery to match the theme of the development, use of environmentally friendly and high quality vehicles, etc. would be examined in consultation with the developers;
- (ii) explore possible rail-GMB interchange schemes; and
- (iii) help develop and implement service adjustments for GMBs to match demand and to improve efficiency.

Other measures to improve PLB operation

17. As an on-going exercise, TD continues to work with the PLB trade to explore and develop other measures to facilitate their operation. Measures that are being undertaken/examined include -

- (a) measures to facilitate initiatives by PLB operators to increase their indirect sources of income by allowing -

- (i) multi-media display on board;
 - (ii) advertising on vehicle body of PLBs;
 - (iii) trial programmes for providing GMB shelters for major off-street GMB terminals to generate advertising revenue;
- (b) measures to improve the quality and image of PLB services -
- (i) introduce quality service features (e.g. call bells and handgrips) and new safety requirements for seatbelts and high seat back with suitable relaxation of the existing weight limit for PLB vehicles;
 - (ii) undertake/facilitate projects to enhance quality PLB services, including PLB newsletters, workshops on customer services and management skills, PLB Quality Driver Award Scheme, driver uniforms; and
- (c) other measures -
- (i) consider designating drop-off points for PLBs at locations close to PLB terminating points to reduce detours or delays; and
 - (ii) allow parking of RMBs at PLB stands at specified points where feasible to facilitate the operational needs of RMBs.

Conversion to cleaner alternative fuel

18. The Administration recently announced a proposal with provision of cash grant to encourage PLBs to convert to use cleaner alternative fuel on a voluntary basis. According to TD's assessment, a substantial proportion of PLB operators will experience net income increase if they replace their diesel PLBs with LPG ones. The Administration is consulting the PLB trade and LegCo on the proposal and will make a decision in the near future.