

File Ref. : TBCR 14/1016/99

Legislative Council Panel on Transport

Subcommittee on matters relating to the implementation of railway development projects

Latest Situation on Northern Link

INTRODUCTION

This paper informs Members of the latest situation of the Northern Link (NOL).

BACKGROUND

Existing Situation of Cross-Boundary Traffic

2. The cross-boundary rail passenger traffic through Lo Wu grew steadily at an average annual rate of about 7% in the early 1990s. With the return of sovereignty since 1997, there have been increasing integration and cross-boundary economic activities with the Pearl River Delta, resulting in a surge of the cross-boundary traffic. Between 1997 and 1999, the growth rate peaked at about 17% per annum. The growth rate in 2001 was about 4%. Daily 2-way passenger traffic at Lo Wu now averages to about 250,000. Moreover, at weekends and festive holidays, daily passenger demand can easily exceed 280,000 with the highest of about 340,000 recorded April this year.

3. As East Rail (ER) can handle up to 90,000 per hour each direction, it can cope with both the domestic and cross-boundary demands. The pressure point of the cross-boundary traffic is at the immigration facilities in Lo Wu Terminal. In particular, during the peak periods at weekends and festive holidays, Lo Wu is so congested that the service at other East Rail's main stations is also affected. Improvement measures are urgently required to meet the growth of the cross-boundary demand and relieve the Lo Wu congestion.

4. In the short term, the Government has initiated a number of relief works at Lo Wu. The current programme of relief works being planned, which include increasing the holding area, modifying/adding immigration counters and widening the passageway, will start progressively later this year for phased completion in 2003 to 2005. Separately, to improve rail passenger flow, the Kowloon-Canton Railway Corporation (KCRC) has embarked on a HK\$200 million programme to construct an additional platform and two footbridges between platforms and the Terminal. The works will also start later this year for phased completion in 2003 to 2004.

Sheung Shui to Lok Ma Chau Spur Line

5. To cope with the growth of the cross-boundary demand, an additional rail passenger boundary crossing at Lok Ma Chau is urgently needed. The Sheung Shui to Lok Ma Chau Spur Line, which makes use of ER's facilities and branches off from ER at Sheung Shui, can be completed early to better serve the purpose.

6. With a revised railway scheme of the Spur Line to adopt tunnel underneath Long Valley, the ecology there will be conserved and the impact to the local community will be minimized. According to the Environmental Impact Assessment Ordinance, the Environmental Protection Department has issued on 6 April 2002 an environmental permit to KCRC for the scheme. Recently, the Chief Executive-in-Council has also authorized the railway scheme under the Railways Ordinance. This marks the completion of the major statutory planning procedures. KCRC has also substantially completed the detailed design and is well gear up to start construction later this year for completion by mid-2007.

7. Upon full expansion, the capacity of the rail passenger boundary crossing at Lok Ma Chau is comparable to that of Lo Wu. As regards roads, the Shenzhen Western Corridor will also more than double the existing cross-boundary vehicular capacity. It is forecasted that the cross-boundary demands in the coming 10 years can be met.

Northern Link (NOL)

8. In view of the lead-time of major infrastructure projects, we must plan further ahead. The Railway Development Strategy 2000 (RDS-2000) promulgated in May 2000 maps out a rail network expansion plan to meet Hong Kong's needs in the next 15 years or so. The NOL is one of the rail projects

recommended by the Strategy. It will connect West Rail at Kam Sheung Road to the new Lok Ma Chau boundary crossing and Kwu Tung Station, both to be completed under the Spur Line project, through Au Tau, Ngau Tam Mei and San Tin.

9. The NOL can serve three functions –
- a) providing the western part of Hong Kong with more direct train services to the boundary by linking West Rail to Lok Ma Chau;
 - b) providing domestic train services to developments at Au Tau, Ngau Tam Mei and San Tin; and
 - c) together with the Spur Line, forming a strategic link to join up West Rail and East Rail at northern New Territories.

10. Therefore, the growth of the cross-boundary traffic from the western part of the territory is only one of the considerations as to the NOL's implementation programme. While Government's planning intention is to develop Au Tau, Ngau Tam Mei and San Tin to house a total population over 100,000 ultimately, the existing population within the NOL's catchment there is about 15,000. To ensure better rail service to passengers as well as more cost-effective use of limited public resources, the NOL also has to integrate with the development being planned along the route.

11. Based on the planning timeframe of the development and the forecast of traffic growth, RDS-2000 has therefore recommended an indicative completion date of 2011 – 2016 for the NOL. This completion window is realistic having regard to the past experience that major rail projects typically need 8 to 10 years from planning to completion in order to properly develop through the statutory procedures and the technical stages.

LATEST SITUATION

12. To facilitate the future implementation of the NOL, action has been taken to complete the necessary preliminary planning and other preparatory works.

13. We have completed the route protection and will continue to administer the protection work in coordination with the land use development along the rail alignment. Once the land use plan and development programme of Au Tau, Ngau Tam Mei and San Tin are finalized, we will firm up the NOL's planning and implementation timetable. We are also closely monitoring the transport demand. If the growth in transport demand or any change in land use warrants, we will consider advancing the implementation of the NOL.

CONCLUSION

14. Members are requested to note the latest situation of the NOL.

Transport Bureau
20 June 2002
(TBCR 14/1016/99)