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Panel on Transport

Subcommittee on matters relating to railways

**Minutes of special meeting on
Friday, 19 December 2003, at 8:30 am
in the Chamber of the Legislative Council Building**

Members present : Hon Miriam LAU Kin-yee, JP (Chairman)
Ir Dr Hon Raymond HO Chung-tai, JP
Hon LAU Kong-wah, JP
Hon Andrew CHENG Kar-foo
Hon TAM Yiu-chung, GBS, JP
Hon Tommy CHEUNG Yu-yan, JP
Hon Albert CHAN Wai-yip
Hon LEUNG Fu-wah, MH, JP
Hon WONG Sing-chi

Non-Subcommittee : Dr Hon TANG Siu-tong, JP
Member attending

Members absent : Dr Hon David CHU Yu-lin, JP
Hon Albert HO Chun-yan
Hon CHAN Kwok-keung, JP
Hon Abraham SHEK Lai-him, JP
Hon LAU Ping-cheung

- Public Officers attending** : Environment, Transport and Works Bureau
- Mr Arthur HO
Deputy Secretary for the Environment, Transport and Works
- Mr William SHIU
Principal Assistant Secretary for the Environment, Transport and Works
- Transport Department
- Mr Peter LUK
Assistant Commissioner/New Territories
- Attendance by invitation** : Kowloon-Canton Railway Corporation
- Mr Samuel LAI
Acting Chief Executive Officer (Designate)
- Mr Y T LI
Acting Senior Director, Transport
- Mr Jonathan YU
Director, Operations
- Mr W K TSUI
General Manager, West Rail Operations
- Clerk in attendance** : Mr Andy LAU
Chief Council Secretary (1)2
- Staff in attendance** : Ms Alice AU
Senior Council Secretary (1)5
- Mr Anthony CHU
Council Secretary (1)2
- Miss Winnie CHENG
Legislative Assistant 5
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I Commissioning of Light Rail Tin Shui Wai Extension and West Rail
(LC Paper No. CB(1)613/03-04(01) - Information paper provided by the
Kowloon-Canton Railway
Corporation)

The Chairman advised that this special meeting was convened to review with the Administration and the Kowloon-Canton Railway Corporation (KCRC) the initial operation of the Light Rail (LR) Tin Shui Wai Extension (TSW Extension) taking into account the issues involved in service provision on 8 December 2003, as well as the contingency plans for the commissioning of West Rail (WR) scheduled for the next day on 20 December 2003.

2. Mr Samuel LAI, Acting Chief Executive Officer (Designate) of KCRC (Acting CEO(D), KCRC), briefly introduced the paper provided by the Corporation (LC Paper No. CB(1)613/03-04(01)) on the subject matter. In particular, he drew members' attention to the following improvements to be made in preparation of WR's opening, having regard to the feedback from passengers during the three-day trial ride between 16 and 18 December 2003:

- (a) The Corporation would step up publicity on WR interchanging arrangements with LR as well as with MTR at the new Nam Cheong Station. Additional Octopus card readers would also be installed at major WR stations to facilitate passengers interchanging from LR to have their Octopus cards validated for onward travelling on WR.
- (b) Additional station staff would be deployed to remind WR passengers to stand behind the yellow line when validating their Octopus cards at the new ticket gates. Relevant publicity would also be enhanced.
- (c) Re-machining of train wheels would continue to reduce the level of vibration and enhance passenger comfort on WR. The Corporation would also pursue the possibility of improving the suspension system with the contractor, provided that the operational safety of the railway system would not be undermined.

LR incident on 8 December 2003 and improvement measures

3. Mr WONG Sing-chi enquired about the cause of the signalling failure which had resulted in service delays on LR TSW Extension on 8 December 2003 causing great inconvenience to the passengers. Expressing similar concern, Dr TANG Siu-tung said that such problems should have been avoided if better preparation was made by the Corporation.

4. Mr Y T LI, Acting Senior Director, Transport of KCRC (Acting SD/T, KCRC), reported that on the first weekday running of the new LR TSW Extension on 8 December 2003, the Corporation had deployed additional vehicles to run short-route service in anticipation of increased passenger demand. However, the trackside

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equipment failed to recognize the coding of some LR vehicles assigned to the new service. Hence, the setting of points at two LR junctions had to switch from automatic to manual operation shortly after 7:00 am causing some irregularity of service. As a result, LR vehicles were quite full when they arrived at stops in southern Tin Shui Wai between 7:00 am and 7:30 am, resulting in passengers being unable to board the first arriving train which further added to crowding on some station platforms. The problem had been resolved on that day and no similar incident had happened since then.

5. Notwithstanding KCRC's explanation, Mr WONG Sing-chi was seriously concerned about the Corporation's oversight in anticipating the potential problems associated with the additional deployment of LR vehicles on the new routes. In response, Acting SD/T, KCRC explained that as normal service would have to be maintained in the existing LR network, only partial testing was conducted for the additional deployment of LR vehicles on 6 and 7 December 2003.

6. Mr TAM Yiu-chung pointed out that the crux of the problem was that the LR network was extended to Tin Shui Wai without a corresponding increase in the fleet size. While additional LR vehicles and buses were deployed to meet passenger demand in the new Tin Shui Wai service area, it had seriously affect the standard of LR service in Tuen Mun. He cautioned that notwithstanding KCRC's assertion that the additional capacity brought by WR could provide relief to passenger demand for LR inter-town services, the Corporation should carefully monitor and assess the actual change in the demand for LR inter-town services after WR's opening. If necessary, additional LR vehicles should be acquired to maintain an adequate level of LR services. Mr TAM also stressed that it would be most important to ensure co-ordination among WR, LR and bus services in order to cope with the external and internal transport demand of residents in Northwest New Territories

WR commissioning

Vibration problems

7. Mr LAU Kong-wah was gravely concerned that the vibration problems detected by members during the visit to WR in late October 2003 still persisted. Despite KCRC's assurance given at the last Subcommittee meeting on 25 November 2003 that the problems had been satisfactorily resolved, complaints about excessive vibration were received from passengers during the trial ride. As WR would be opened soon, he enquired about the Corporation's further improvements to ensure that the vibration would not be noticeable to the passengers.

8. Mr WONG Sing-chi suggested that the Corporation could consider broadcasting special announcements on the train to forewarn the passengers of unusual vibration at certain sections of the alignment.

9. While acknowledging members' concern on the vibration problems, Acting CEO(D), KCRC said that as the perception of vibration could be subjective, the

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Corporation had been monitoring the intensity of vibration on WR trains by instrument. After the train wheels had been re-machined, the vibration was reduced to a level that was generally considered acceptable for human comfort. He assured members that continuous efforts would be made to seek further improvements. As Mr WONG Sing-chi suggested, the Corporation would also consider the feasibility of installing vibration meter in the driving cabin so that the driver could give out cautionary messages to the passengers when unusual vibration occurred.

10. In reply to the Chairman, Acting CEO(D)/KCRC explained that more vibration might be experienced by the passengers as the train travelled between Tsuen Wan West Station and WR Tai Lam Tunnel as the control system would automatically adjust the speed of trains when they passed through this seven-kilometre section of WR alignment to ensure that suitable headway was maintained in accordance with the train schedule. After the train wheels were re-machined, the vibration at that section of the track had also been resolved.

11. Ir Dr Raymond HO considered that if the Corporation had conducted full-load and half-load testings for WR as he had previously suggested, the vibration problems as well as other problems in the signalling system might have been detected and hence, resolved earlier. He further asked whether the reliability of train cars had been fully-tested during the trial runs.

12. In reply, Acting SD/T, KCRC reported that the same type of train cars procured from the same contractor were used for both WR and East Rail (ER). The train cars had been in operation on ER for over a year and the performance was satisfactory.

Interchange arrangements

13. Mr Albert CHAN welcomed the Corporation's decision to normalize the standby bus routes operating in parallel with the new TSW Extension. Both Dr TANG Siu-tong and Mr TAM Yiu-chung considered that these supplemental bus routes should be maintained for a while after WR's opening. Mr TAM further said that taking into account the experience of the LR incident, the Corporation should deploy additional front-line staff at WR stations to assist interchanging passengers. Mr LAU Kong-wah also said that the Corporation should continue to waive the fares for these bus routes during WR's initial operation so as to avoid creating unnecessary confusion.

14. In reply, Acting SD/T, KCRC said that the arrangement to provide free bus services to back up the newly-opened LR TSW Extension would be maintained during the initial operation of WR.

15. As a related issue, Mr Albert CHAN commended the Administration for preparing a booklet entitled "Working Together for a new and convenient transport network to serve NT West" which contained comprehensive information on the changes to franchised bus and green minibus services to be introduced upon WR's opening. However, Mr CHAN referred to WR's heavy reliance on the use of feeder

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services, and expressed concern about WR's financial viability. He was worried that the Corporation might seek to increase WR fare and reduce free bus services provided to the passengers.

Contingency arrangements

16. Mr CHENG Kar-foo pointed out that under the current alert system for major transport incidents, the source operator was required to issue a "Red Alert" if an emergency incident had occurred and was expected to continue for over 20 minutes. However, taking into account the substantial carrying capacity of heavy rail systems such as WR, the Administration might need to review whether the 20-minute threshold should be lowered to allow for the early mobilization of emergency transport services to disperse the large number of waiting passengers.

17. The Deputy Secretary for the Environment, Transport and Works (DS for ETW) replied that in case of any transport emergency, the concerned operator was required to alert the Transport Department (TD) and other public transport operators as soon as possible so that emergency transport support services could be arranged in the first instance. Given the time and arrangements needed to mobilize such support services, the Administration considered it appropriate to allow some time for the concerned operator to assess the situation and decide whether service recovery was possible within 20 minutes.

18. DS for ETW added that having regard to the changing circumstances as well as the higher expectation of the community, this threshold might need to be reviewed. In this connection, Mr CHENG Kar-foo said that the Administration should also consider setting objective requirements in respect of the timing for issuing the "Red" or "Amber" alerts by the concerned operator. The Chairman agreed that the workings of the existing alert system might need to be improved. She requested the Administration to provide a written response to the suggestions made by members after the meeting.

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19. In response to Mr CHENG Kar-foo's enquiry, Acting SD/T, KCRC said that in case of any service disruption, the Corporation would act in accordance with the established alert system and inform TD, other public transport operators and the public as early as possible. After the ER rail crack incident on 12 December 2003, the Corporation decided that earlier warnings should be provided. If any service disruption was expected to continue for over eight minutes, immediate notification would be given to TD and the public. Moreover, the Corporation would also enhance dissemination of information to passengers. If train service was disrupted for more than three minutes, special announcements would be broadcast on the trains and platforms. He confirmed that the same arrangement would also apply to WR and LR.

20. Dr TANG Siu-tong was concerned about the safe evacuation of passengers in case of train failure in the middle of the track on viaduct. In reply, Acting SD/T, KCRC explained that as two-way-operation was allowed on WR tracks, the control centre could always deploy another train to pick up the passengers evacuated from the

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default train. Access walkways were also provided on the side of the track.

21. Referring to the confusing messages sent out by the Corporation as to the real cause of the LR service delay on 8 December 2003, as well as the seriousness of the ER incident on 12 December 2003, Mr LAU Kong-wah considered that the Corporation should make every effort to ensure the accuracy of information disseminated to the public in future.

22. In response, Acting CEO(D), KCRC agreed that the Corporation would review whether further improvements could be made to ensure the timely dissemination of accurate information to the public. However, he called on members' understanding that it was not always possible for the staff on the ground to obtain all the necessary information in the first instance. Once the cause of the LR service delay on 8 December 2003 was ascertained, immediate steps were taken to correct the previous statements that the delay was caused as a result of passengers leaving home early to catch the new LR trains.

Maintaining safe and proper railway operation

23. Mr Albert CHAN said that various problems in relation to the construction and commissioning of WR as well as the recent incidents causing service disruptions on LR and ER had cast serious doubts on the ability of KCRC's management to maintain safe and proper railway operation. He thus enquired about the measures to be taken by the Corporation to restore public confidence.

24. As a related issue, Mr CHENG Kar-foo reiterated his request that the Administration should consider setting a performance requirement on train services disruption so that the performance of railway corporations could be properly monitored by the Government.

25. In response, Acting CEO(D), KCRC stressed that every effort would be made by the Corporation to ensure the smooth operation of WR right from the start, taking into account the views and suggestions made by members and the public. After months' of trial operations, WR was able to maintain high train punctuality and service delivery rates. The Corporation was confident that safe and reliable train service would be provided to the travelling public when WR commenced passenger operation on the next day. However, some minor problems might occur causing occasional disruptions to train service. He assured members that the Corporation would take each and every incident seriously and review whether any further improvements could be made.

26. Responding to Mr Albert CHAN's enquiry about the Administration's role as the regulator, DS for ETW said that the Administration had been closely monitoring the WR project in every stage from construction to commissioning. The Administration would ensure that the new railway was in a safe and sound condition before granting the necessary statutory approval for WR commissioning. Moreover, the Administration had reviewed with the Corporation the experience in the LR TSW

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Extension opening in planning for the smooth opening of WR. In particular, more publicity would be launched to familiarize the public with the services of WR, as well as the feeder services provided by LR and other public transport modes.

27. DS for ETW further said that the corporate governance of KCRC had been enhanced with new membership of the Managing Board. The role and functions of various Committees under the Managing Board had also been strengthened to provide better support to the Board.

28. As regards the Administration's monitoring on the performance of railway corporations, DS for ETW stressed that at present, there were already performance requirements on "Train service delivery", "Passenger journeys on time" and "Train punctuality" which the railway corporations must comply with. These were considered appropriate standards for measuring train service levels. Moreover, the Administration would ensure that the causes of major service disruptions were correctly identified and that appropriate improvement measures were taken to prevent similar incidents from recurring.

II Any other business

29. There being no other business, the meeting ended at 9:40 am.

Council Business Division 1
Legislative Council Secretariat
24 February 2004