

Tel No. : (852) 2973 8148
Fax No.: (852) 2136 3281
Our ref.: HWF(F) 3/4/4/1 Pt. 25

20 July 2005

The Hon Mr LI Wah-ming
The Chairman of the
LegCo Panel on Food Safety and Environmental Hygiene
Legislative Council Building
8 Jackson Road, Central
Hong Kong
(Fax: 2509 0775)

Dear Mr Li,

Administration of Urn Grave Cemeteries

This letter sets out the follow up actions taken by the Food and Environmental Hygiene Department (FEHD) to improve the administration of urn grave cemeteries.

BACKGROUND

At the meeting of the Panel on Food Safety and Environmental Hygiene on 14 December 2004, Members discussed the paper “Administration of Urn Grave Cemeteries”. The Chairman requested that the Panel be kept informed of the follow up actions taken to implement the recommendations by The Ombudsman to improve the administration of urn grave cemeteries.

FOLLOW-UP ACTIONS

Conduct of a Full Survey

FEHD will take forward a full scale survey of all urn graves to verify the existing data in its records. Given the large number of urn graves involved,

FEHD plans to conduct the survey by phases. The first phase to verify the records of some 5,000 urn graves in selected sections of Wo Hop Shek Cemetery (WHSC) has commenced recently for completion by the end of the year. Based on experience gained from the first phase of the survey, FEHD will embark on the remaining phase(s) with a view to transferring all the updated data to a single computer database.

Tracking System for Exhumed Human Remains

To assist the detection of irregularities at an early stage, FEHD has since March 2005 improved its administrative system to keep track of the remains of coffin burial in public cemeteries upon exhumation after six years.

Tighter Security Control

To deter illegal activities, FEHD has enhanced inspection by requiring cemetery staff to step up routine inspections and conduct daily patrol of selected areas near the main roads in WHSC, and set up four security guard posts to strengthen surveillance at strategic locations.

Follow-up on Outstanding Case with Irregularities

FEHD has taken active steps to follow up the four outstanding cases, including posting notices on the graves inviting parties concerned to provide information and making further attempts to contact the descendants of the registered deceased and others concerned in order to collect more facts on the burials that were not recorded by the then Regional Services Department. FEHD will formulate concrete plans when more information is gathered on the cases. As these urn graves were allocated some 40 years ago and may contain the remains of the deceased, FEHD will adopt a very prudent approach, seek legal advice and take regard of moral considerations when deciding on a course of action.

Guidelines and Training to Staff

FEHD has arranged for circulation of the guidelines on “Courtesy in Dealing with Members of the Public” to and customer service training for all cemetery staff at regular intervals.

Registration System for Cemeteries Contractors

FEHD has since March 2005 established a registration system for contractors providing exhumation, burial and grave covering/headstone services in the public cemeteries. All contractors are required to register with the Department on a compulsory basis in order to gain access to the Department's cemeteries to carry out work.

If the contractor fails to comply with the conditions for registration, FEHD will issue a warning letter. If there is a further breach, FEHD will remove the contractor from the registration list for a period of 12 months. In addition, on detection of any illegal burial/exhumation, FEHD will prohibit the contractor from entering the cemeteries and take out prosecution. Upon conviction, FEHD will de-register the contractor permanently.

Enhancement of Public Awareness

Since mid-November 2004, FEHD has put on its website educational messages that it is the duty of the descendants to maintain the graves of their ancestors and that it is important for the descendants to be present at burial/exhumation process. FEHD has also attached this message to the application forms for burial/exhumation for the attention of both the descendants and the trade when they apply for burial or exhumation permits.

Other Improvement Measures

FEHD has installed 50 warning signs against illegal burial/exhumation, and 160 directional signs to facilitate descendants to locate urn graves in the WHSC. FEHD has also shortened the processing time for allocating vacated urn grave spaces from three weeks to two weeks.

Yours sincerely,

(Vincent Liu)

for Secretary for Health, Welfare and Food

b.c.c. DFEH (Attn: Ms Annette Lee) 2536 0355