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Panel on Economic Services and Panel on Planning, Lands and Works

Background brief on the proposed development of a domestic heliport in Sheung Wan

Introduction

Domestic helicopter services comprise mainly local sightseeing flights, business charters, and special-purpose flights for airlifting, aerial surveying and photography. Such services have recorded substantial growth in recent years. Between 2001 and 2003, the number of annual domestic flights increased by 126% from 4,790 movements to 10,831 movements. The growth was mainly driven by the demand for sightseeing flights and business charters, which took up about 80% of the total domestic helicopter movements in 2003. According to the projection of the consultancy commissioned by the Administration, the domestic helicopter services market is estimated to grow by an average of 6.3% per year between now and 2020.

Site search for a permanent domestic heliport

2. Since the closure of the Central Heliport in Admiralty in 2003, there is no permanent heliport for commercial services in the urban area. Helicopter operators currently operate from a temporary facility at the West Kowloon Reclamation, which will eventually have to be closed down to make way for the development of the West Kowloon Cultural District.

3. Since 1998, the Administration has conducted repeated site searches to identify a suitable site for a domestic heliport which has to meet a number of stringent requirements, including:

- (a) It must be centrally located, easily accessible, as well as in close proximity to the central business district, major hotels and conference facilities. The central location is to provide easy access

to tourists and businessmen and support efficient and seamless air connection between the central business district, the Hong Kong International Airport and other parts of Hong Kong;

- (b) The site must be located at the waterfront with unobstructed flight path. This is necessary to fulfill the safety requirements imposed by the International Civil Aviation Organization on single-engine helicopters – the helicopter type most commonly used for domestic services; and
- (c) The site must fulfill all the necessary environmental requirements such that its uses would not conflict with neighbouring land uses.

Site on the waterfront of Sheung Wan

4. After a comprehensive site-search exercise conducted on both sides of the Harbour, a site which lies along the waterfront in front of the Western Park Sports Centre has been identified. The site measures 7 400 m². The proposed heliport will take up initially 4 400 m², leaving the rest of the area for future expansion. According to the Administration, the heliport on this site would be able to handle up to 43,000 movements per year, or on average 118 daily movements. The capacity is roughly four times that of the existing domestic operation and will be able to meet the demand beyond 2020. The heliport will be developed and operated by the private sector under a tenancy agreement to be awarded through an open tender. The tenant will develop the heliport at its own cost and operate the heliport for the common use of all helicopter operators on a fair and equal basis for a fixed period. Further details of the proposed permanent domestic heliport in Sheung Wan and the proposed development mode are set out in LC Paper No. CB(1) 376/04-05(04).

5. In discussing the proposed development of a domestic heliport in Sheung Wan at the meeting of the Panel on Economic Services (ES Panel) on 7 December 2004, the Panel noted that the Central and Western District Council had passed a motion in May 2004 objecting to the proposal to develop a domestic heliport in the district. The District Council was of the view that the waterfront should be reserved for public use. The Administration indicated that it would consult the District Council in January 2005 on the proposed permanent domestic heliport in Sheung Wan and would take the opportunity to address the concerns of the District Council.

6. The helicopter industry also holds the view that the proposed site in Sheung Wan is inappropriate as it would unnecessarily utilize scarce harbour-front resources. The industry has pointed out that a site outside the Hong Kong Convention and Exhibition Centre (HKCEC), which is a more convenient site, has already been zoned for use as a heliport. The industry therefore requests the

Government to allow commercial uses at the heliport planned outside the HKCEC.

Planned heliport outside Hong Kong Convention and Exhibition Centre

7. Under the draft Wan Chai North Outline Zoning Plan gazetted in April 2002, a permanent heliport is planned outside the HKCEC. Reclamation works required for the planned heliport has not been undertaken and the entire Wan Chai reclamation is under review. According to the Administration, the planned heliport at HKCEC would be confined to the operation of the Government Flying Service (GFS) only and primarily for emergency and security purposes. To meet the emergency operational requirements of the Police, the GFS heliport must be located close to the Police Headquarter Building. It was mainly on this consideration that the HKCEC site was chosen for provision of a GFS heliport notwithstanding the various constraints. The original plan is to demolish an existing pier and reclaim a narrow strip of 768 m² to provide a total site area of 3 500 m². Whilst one landing/take-off pad and one small emergency parking pad can be provided, they cannot be used concurrently for the landing or take-off of helicopters. No refuelling facility would be available at the site. Having regard to extensive public concerns on the need to protect the harbour and to minimize the extent of reclamation, GFS has recently carefully reviewed the development parameters of the heliport. The land requirement could be reduced so that no reclamation would be needed. When the subject was discussed at the meeting of the Panel on Planning, Lands and Works (PLW Panel) on 7 December 2001, members of the PLW Panel were concerned about the possible noise and safety impact on visitors to the HKCEC as well as the effect on the HKCEC as a tourist attraction. The Administration undertook to confine the usage of the heliport at HKCEC to the limited uses by the GFS.

8. On the feasibility of co-locating a GFS heliport and a commercial heliport at HKCEC, the Administration advises that an additional reclamation of roughly about 1 500 m² of land would probably be required to provide two additional landing/take-off pads, two parking pads, a passenger lounge and a refuelling facility. The Administration's preliminary assessment is that the additional reclamation for the purpose of accommodating commercial helicopter services would not satisfy the "overriding public need" principle under the ruling made by the Court of Final Appeal on the statutory principle of protection and preservation of the harbour, in particular when there is a reasonable alternative in Sheung Wan without the need for reclamation.

9. Whilst raising no objection to the proposed Government heliport for GFS use at the HKCEC site, Wanchai District Council strongly objected to any commercial operation at that site. Written submission from Wanchai District Council is in LC Paper No. CB(1) 791/04-05(02).

Other alternative sites

10. The ES Panel has also explored whether it is feasible to provide a permanent domestic heliport at the northern tip of Kai Tak, co-locate both the domestic and cross-boundary heliports at Macau Ferry Terminal, reclaim a small piece of land at the existing cargo handling area outside Macau Ferry Terminal or build a small island or lagoon in the harbour to provide a permanent domestic heliport.

11. The Administration advises that most of the helicopters used for domestic services are single-engine helicopters. According to the safety requirements imposed by the International Civil Aviation Organization, the site for the landing/take off of single-engine helicopters must be at surface level with unobstructed flight path. As the heliport on top of the Macau Ferry Terminal is an elevated one, it would not be suitable for use by single-engine helicopters.

12. As regards the suggestion of reclaiming a site at the harbour front for a permanent domestic heliport, the Administration has pointed out that as any harbour reclamation must satisfy the “over-riding public need” principle according to the ruling of the Court of Final Appeal on the Wan Chai Development Phase II delivered in January 2004, the Administration believes that given that there is already a suitable site available in Sheung Wan, the proposal of reclaiming another site to accommodate commercial helicopter services would not satisfy the said principle and would be susceptible to legal challenge by any member of the public.

13. Regarding the proposal to locate the permanent domestic heliport in Kai Tak, the Panel noted that for the heliport to be adequately patronized, it might be necessary for it to be located in proximity to the central business district.

The way forward

14. Given the very strong and growing demand for commercial helicopter services, the ES Panel is of the view that there is a genuine and urgent need for a permanent domestic heliport in the central business district. The ES Panel will hold a joint meeting with the PLW Panel on 31 January 2005 with a view to resolving the matter. Representatives from the two District Councils, the helicopter service operators, the Society for the Protection of the Harbour Limited and other interested parties have been invited to the meeting.