

ETWB(T) 3/2/10

Tel. No. 2189 2104

Fax. No. 2136 8017

1 March 2007

Mr. Andy Lau
Clerk to Panel on Transport
Legislative Council Secretariat
3rd floor, Citibank Tower,
3 Garden Road,
Central, Hong Kong

By Fax [2121 0420]

Dear Mr. Lau,

Panel on Transport

Retrofitting of high back seats and seat belts on public light bus (PLBs)

Thank you for your letter of 14 February 2007. The latest developments in regard to our various measures to improve the safety of public light buses and taxis are as follows:

Public Light Buses

Retrofitting of Passenger Seat Belts and High Back Seats

Transport Department (TD) has completed four sets of retrofitting design plans that meet the safety requirements of PLBs and has briefed the trade on the details. So far, 32 PLBs have been retrofitted with passenger seat belts and high back seats. Some green minibus (GMB) operators are now implementing their retrofitting programmes with TD's technical advice and assistance. We believe around 80 GMBs will be retrofitted with such facilities in the coming months. By January 2007, 1,833 PLBs have been equipped with seatbelts and high back seats.

Currently, about 1,145 PLBs have served for eight or more years. As the Administration will shortly be launching a subsidy scheme, where vehicle owners who replace their pre-Euro and Euro I diesel commercial vehicles (including PLBs) with Euro IV models will be given a one-off grant, we believe the majority of these old PLBs will be replaced in the coming year.

Installation of Vehicle Monitoring System

Since 2004, TD has been engaging suppliers to carry out trials on vehicle monitoring systems or “blackboxes” on PLBs. The first trial in 2004 had been unsuccessful. A further trial by another supplier was carried out in the second half of 2006 but it was also unsuccessful because the device suffered from data loss and damages. TD has since managed to engage a third supplier, who had started a six-month trial in October 2006 and installed its system on 23 GMBs running different routes. So far, the trial has been in good progress.

We have sought expert advice from the Automotive Industry Development Division of the Hong Kong Productivity Council. We understand the Panel Secretariat has also written to the universities for advice. So far, we have received no advice or information from these institutions. We would continue to liaise with the various organizations, keep in view overseas practice and explore the feasibility of installing such devices on PLBs.

Display of Safety Charter inside PLBs

In March 2005, we helped the trade to launch the Safety Charter. So far, about 2,800 PLB drivers have signed the Charter, thus demonstrating their commitment to safe driving. As suggested by Members and with the support from the trade, TD has designed a simplified version of the Safety Charter in the form of a sticker so that it can be displayed inside the PLBs. The stickers have been distributed to all PLB operators. 300 GMBs are now posted with safety charter stickers inside the vehicles. A major GMB operator will also post these stickers inside its 500 GMBs in the coming weeks. TD will continue to encourage other GMB operators as well as RMB drivers and owners to post the stickers in the same way.

Installation of Speed Display Devices (SDDs)

In April 2005, we made mandatory installation of SDDs on PLBs a new vehicle licence condition upon issue or renewal of a PLB licence. By now, all PLBs have installed such a device. Meanwhile, we are finalising legislative proposals to make SDDs a standard requirement on PLBs and that misuse or malfunctioning of the devices would constitute an offence. We plan to introduce the legislation in the next three months.

Mandatory Display of PLB Driver Name and Complaint Hotline

PLB drivers are now required under the Passenger Service Licence conditions to display their name plates at the front of the vehicles while they are on duty. We plan to submit legislative proposals to make the display of the driver's name plate mandatory in May.

PLB operators are already required under the Passenger Service Licence conditions to display the Transport Complaint Unit (TCU) hotline inside the PLB since November 2005. This new requirement has effectively increased public awareness of the complaint channel. About 90% of the complaints against PLBs are now made via the hotline.

We note that there are suggestions that PLB operators should be required to display the driver name and TCU hotline on the body of PLBs. However, the PLB trade has raised strong objection to the proposal on the grounds that it would exert unnecessary pressure on the PLB drivers, and may invite abuse of the complaint channel. We would therefore hold this proposal in abeyance for the time being, and would review the effects of other measures/actions first.

Pre-service Training for Applicants of PLB driving licence

With the in-principle support of the PLB trades, we are formulating a proposal to require applicants for the PLB licence to attend pre-service training courses that focus on driving behaviour and attitude. When the details are ready, we will consult the trade and submit legislative proposals to this Council in due course.

Air Bags on Taxis

We have conducted a study on overseas standards and practices for installation of air bags on taxis. Countries covered in the research include the United States, the United Kingdom, Japan, New Zealand, Australia, Canada, Singapore and the European Union. The key findings are as follows:

- (a) In many countries, especially the car-manufacturing countries, including the European Union, Japan and the United States, air bags can be one of the means to meet the vehicle protection requirements but it is not a mandatory device.
- (b) With the exception of the United States, all countries in our research do not have statutory requirements for installation of air bags on vehicles.
- (c) Even in the United States, it is allowed to fit air bag inhibitor to deactivate the air bag at the passenger side. This is probably because it has been found that the variation in body size and weight of the occupants may reduce the effectiveness of the protection from standard air bag. There were some extreme cases in which the occupants were killed by the air bag.
- (d) Japan, being the dominant supplier of taxis in Hong Kong, is found to have no statutory requirement on air bags for taxis. Also, air bag is not a standard feature for taxis used in Japan.

Given the absence of legislation and international standards on air bags, we consider it not appropriate to make it a mandatory requirement for taxis in Hong Kong. We will continue to discuss with vehicle manufacturers and the transport trades on measures to better protect drivers and passengers on taxis. We will also continue to keep in view overseas standards and the latest developments of vehicle safety devices for better occupant protection.

- 5 -

I hope the above have addressed your concerns in this regards. Please let me know if you have further enquiries.

Yours sincerely,

(Macella Lee)
for Secretary for the Environment,
Transport and Works