

**For discussion
23 June 2006**

Legislative Council Panel on Transport

Measures to Enhance Road Safety and Safety of Public Light Bus and Taxi Operations

Purpose

This paper informs Members of the progress of measures to enhance road safety and safety of public light buses (PLB) and taxi operations.

Background

2. In late 2004, we put forth a package of measures covering legislation, enforcement, publicity, education and technology application to enhance road safety and safety of PLB operations. We provided our last report in December 2005. The latest position of the various measures is set out in the following paragraphs. We have also examined the feasibility of installing airbags on taxis.

General Road Safety Measures

(I) Red Light Cameras

3. We have originally installed red light camera housings at 111 signalised road junctions, and 28 cameras operated on a rotational basis. In late 2005, we have embarked on an expansion programme to procure 68 additional cameras and install camera housings at 20 new junctions. With this programme, we will have 96 cameras at 131 housings, representing some three-fold increase in the camera-to-housing ratio from 1:4 to 1:1.4, or from 25% to 73%. The first 24 new cameras have been installed, and the second batch of 24 cameras will be installed in July/August. The final batch of 20 cameras and housings will be installed by October. We plan to further expand the red light camera system, including replacing wet-film cameras that have reached the end of their serviceable life and continuing to increase the coverage of the system.

(II) Installation of Vehicular Flashing Green Signals

4. We have further examined the suggestion to install vehicular advance warning devices (AWD), such as vehicular flashing green (VFG), at our traffic lights. Our trial of an existing device used in the Mainland shows that such device is incompatible with the traffic control system in Hong Kong.

5. Moreover, a number of overseas researches/trials indicated that AWDs or VFGs at junctions would increase the risk of head-rear collisions¹ because different drivers have different responses to such devices. Some may decide to stop when they see the flashing green, others may decide to speed through the junction.

6. In the light of the above findings, we do not plan to install AWDs or VFGs at this stage, but will continue to monitor researches and developments in this respect.

(III) Speed Enforcement Cameras

7. To deter speeding, we have installed speed enforcement camera housings at 85 locations on major roads and expressways with 10 cameras operating on a rotational basis. We plan to improve the camera-to-housing ratio and install more of such cameras and housings at other strategic roads. Since the installation involves a number of technical issues such as site constraints and the availability of power supply, we are working on the potential sites and the detailed implementation plan.

(IV) Enforcement

8. The Police has continued to take enforcement actions to combat inappropriate driving behaviour. With effect from 1 January 2006, the penalties for failing to comply with traffic signals have increased from 3 to 5 driving offence points, and from \$450 to \$600. The number of prosecutions against failing to observe traffic lights has dropped from 12 466 in the first four months of 2005 to 8 996 in the same period in 2006, representing a decrease of 28%. The decrease in prosecutions in spite of strengthened enforcement actions shows that our latest measures have increased the deterrent effect against inappropriate driving behaviour.

¹ For example, the Federal Highway Administration of USA have conducted trials on the use of AWDs and found that such device encourages more drivers to speed up to beat the AWD and to increase aggressive driving behaviour, thus causing more crashes than is the case without the flashing green. They have thus decided not to use AWDs.

9. With effect from 1 January 2006, we have included the offence of using hand-held telephone or telecommunication device while driving in the Schedule to the Fixed Penalty (Criminal Proceedings) Ordinance, so that prosecution can be carried out by way of issuing fixed penalty tickets. The number of prosecutions has increased by over 250% from 2 091 in the first four months in 2005 to 7 512 in the same period in 2006.

(V) Education and Publicity

10. Apart from enforcement, continuous education and publicity is equally important. In this connection, our efforts have been focusing on cultivating a responsible driving culture. The following measures will continue to be taken —

- (a) carry out regular targeted publicity for PLB, taxi and non-franchised bus drivers;
- (b) produce TV and radio Announcements of Public Interest and increase the airtime for road safety publicity;
- (c) use mobile publicity media to spread road safety messages;
- (d) display road safety messages at major roads and tunnel entrances/exits;
- (e) carry out promotional activities on the safety of passenger vehicles;
- (f) organise talks and seminars on road safety for drivers; and
- (g) distribute pamphlets and launch on-street educational activities at major traffic blackspots, public carparks and boundary control points.

Specific Measures for PLBs

(VI) Installation of Speed Display Devices (SDDs)

11. SDDs are primarily used to facilitate monitoring by PLB passengers and caution PLB drivers against speeding. In April 2005, we made mandatory installation of such devices on PLBs a new vehicle licence condition upon issue or renewal of a PLB licence. At present, over 98% of all PLBs have installed such devices. By the end of this month, all PLBs should have been installed with SDDs.

12. Meanwhile, we are preparing legislative amendments to make SDDs a standard requirement on PLBs under the Road Traffic (Construction and Maintenance of Vehicles) Regulations, and that any misuse or malfunctioning of the devices would constitute an offence.

(VII) Installation of Vehicle Monitoring System

13. The Vehicle Monitoring System is essentially a “blackbox” which can keep a full record of the operating conditions of the vehicle for a period of time. Since 2004, the Transport Department (TD) has been engaging suppliers to carry out trials of such devices on PLBs. A trial was carried out on four green minibuses in 2004, but owing to technical problems, it was suspended in early 2005. Earlier this year, we have found new suppliers who are willing to conduct new trials on PLBs. The trials will commence in July and will last at least 6 months. We would keep in view the results of the trials and explore the feasibility of installing such devices on PLBs as a long-term measure.

(VIII) Installation of Speed Limiters on PLBs

14. A speed limiter limits the vehicle speed to a specified level by controlling the fuel feed to the engine. However, there are technical problems with installing such a device on LPG vehicles. In fact, in countries like Australia and Korea where commercial vehicles are required to be installed with speed limiters, such requirement is not applicable to LPG vehicles, and LPG vehicles there are not installed with speed limiters. Besides, the suppliers of LPG PLBs in Hong Kong have confirmed that given the technical difficulties, they cannot add speed limiters on LPG PLBs. We will continue to keep in view the technological development and overseas practices in this regard.

(IX) Installation of Passenger Seat Belts and High Back Seats

15. To better protect PLB passengers in traffic accidents, the law requires all PLBs to be equipped with seat belts and high back seats with effect from 1 August 2004 and that PLB passengers have to wear seat belts, if such are available. By May 2006, 1 752 PLBs (40% of all PLBs) have been equipped with passenger seat belts and high back seats.

16. We note that most PLB owners would replace a PLB when it has served eight to ten years. Currently, about 1 040 PLBs (24% of all PLBs) have served for eight or more years. We therefore expect that these vehicles would be replaced by new vehicles in the coming one or two years. By then, over 60% of the PLBs will be equipped with seat belts.

17. To assist owners of PLBs registered before 1 August 2004 (without high back seats and seat belts) to retrofit such facilities, we have commissioned a technical contractor to prepare retrofit design plans that meet the safety requirements of PLBs. We expect the retrofit design plans to be available by the third quarter of this year. When such plans are ready, we will encourage PLB owners to retrofit such facilities on their PLBs, and some operators have already indicated interest in doing so. With this initiative, the proportion of PLBs equipped with seat belts would further increase.

(X) Enforcement Operations

18. The Police have conducted special publicity-cum-enforcement operations on seat belt wearing by PLB passengers. In the first four months of 2006, the Police instituted 588 prosecutions against PLB passengers who fail to wear seat belts, representing 66% of the total number of prosecutions instituted in 2005.

19. Recently, the Police have also carried out large-scale covert operations during night time and early morning to combat inappropriate driving behaviour of PLB drivers. The operations involved plainclothes undercover agents, observation posts, uniformed police on roadblock duties, and the use of in-car video systems or laser guns. These covert operations are found to have great deterrent effects. The Police will continue to carry out such enforcement operations.

(XI) Mandatory Display of PLB Driver Name Plate

20. At present, PLB drivers are required under the Passenger Service Licence conditions to display their name plates at the front of the vehicles while they are on duty. To ensure compliance, we are making legislative amendments to make the display of the driver's name plate mandatory under the Road Traffic (Public Service Vehicles) Regulations, so that failure to display the name plates of PLB drivers will constitute an offence.

(XII) Mandatory Display of the Complaint Hotline

21. Since November 2005, we have incorporated the requirement for all PLB operators to display the Transport Complaint Unit hotline inside the PLB as a Passenger Service Licence condition. This new requirement has effectively increased public awareness of the complaint channel. The number of complaints received by the hotline against PLBs has increased by 32% in the first quarter of 2006 when compared with the third quarter of 2005. More than 90% of the complaints against PLBs are now made via the hotline.

(XIII) Entry Requirements for Applicants of PLB Driving Licence

22. There are suggestions to ban repeat traffic offenders from being PLB drivers. As a start, we are examining the following additional entry requirements for applicants for PLB driving licence:

- (a) Requiring applicants for the PLB licence to attend pre-service training courses that focus on driving behaviour and attitude; and
- (b) Banning drivers who have been convicted of traffic offences repeatedly or whose driving licences are suspended within a specified period (say, 3 to 5 years prior to their application for PLB licence) from applying for the PLB licence.

23. We have consulted the PLB trade of the above proposal and they are generally supportive. We are working out the details and will submit legislative proposals to this Council in due course.

(XIV) Training for In-service PLB Drivers

24. Continuous in-service training is vital to remind PLB drivers of the importance of safe driving. Since August 2003, TD has been organising the “PLB Driver Training Course” and “PLB Driver Safety Workshop” to help improve the driving behaviour of PLB drivers. About 1,000 drivers have attended the course/workshop. In the first half of 2006, TD has organised two refresher workshops on road safety for PLB drivers, and more workshops/seminars for both PLB drivers/operators will be organised in the coming months. In addition, TD has also organised jointly with the Vocational Training Council an “Advanced PLB Driver Training Course” since April 2004. PLB drivers who attend the course will be given a subsidy amounting to 70% of the course fee. So far, about 300 PLB drivers have attended the course.

(XV) Road Safety Publicity Programme for PLB Drivers

25. To enhance the road safety awareness of PLB drivers, we have organised with the Road Safety Council a large-scale PLB safety campaign from January to May 2006 to promote safe driving behaviour and quality service among PLB drivers. The campaign, which attracted the participation of 625 full-time PLB drivers, was concluded successfully on 12 May.

(XVI) Promulgation of PLB Driver Safety Charter

26. In March 2005, we helped the trade to launch the Safety Charter. So far, about 2,600 PLB drivers have signed the Charter, thus demonstrating their commitment to safe driving. We will continue to encourage more PLB drivers to do the same.

(XVII) Strengthening of Management of Drivers

27. To enhance management and control of the green minibus operators over their drivers, the green minibus operators are required under the Passenger Service Licence condition to ensure that all drivers are their employees. At present, about 90% of the 147 green minibus operators have complied with the above condition and by the third quarter of 2006, it would increase to over 97%². We have urged all the green minibuses operators to review and strengthen their management of and monitoring over drivers, with particular emphasis on the latter's driving behaviour.

28. We have also devised a standard Drivers' Code in consultation with the trade for issue as guideline for PLB drivers and promote the compliance of the guideline through TD's regular liaison with the trade to further enhance passenger safety.

Measures to Protect Taxi drivers and Passengers

29. To better protect taxi drivers and passengers, we have introduced seat belt legislation to drivers and front seat passengers of taxis in July 1989. In January 2001, the legislation was further extended to rear seat taxi passengers. Taxis drivers and passengers do generally comply with the requirements. We notice that some taxi drivers may sometimes use the seat belt improperly for the sake of convenience. We will strengthen our publicity and education on the importance of proper use of seat belts and the Police will also pay special attention in this regard.

30. There are suggestions to install air bags on taxis to better protect taxi drivers and passengers in case of accidents. Currently there is no requirement for vehicles, including taxis, in Hong Kong to be equipped with air bags. Similarly, in Japan, which is the major supplier of local taxis, airbags are neither a statutory requirement nor a standard feature.

² The remaining would take longer to comply with the condition, pending the completion of court cases involving partnership disputes.

31. In this connection, it must be noted that most overseas countries, including Japan and the European Union which are the main sources of vehicles running in Hong Kong, do not have legislation that require vehicles to be installed with air bags, nor do they stipulate any standards for air bags on vehicles. Although many private cars have been installed with air bags, there are still differences in views regarding the optimal number and position of airbags.

32. In view of the diverse views and practices in regard to installation of air bags, and the absence of legislation and international standards, we will continue to keep in view overseas standards and practices with a view to identifying new requirements and standards that are suitable for Hong Kong. We will also consult the transport trades on the related issues.

Advice Sought

33. Members are requested to note the contents of this paper.

Environment, Transport and Works Bureau
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