

**For discussion
on 9 January 2007**

LegCo Panel on Food Safety and Environmental Hygiene

Progress Report on Crematorium and Columbarium Facilities

Purpose

Further to LC Paper No. CB(2) 270/05-06(03) discussed by this Panel in November 2005, this paper reports on the plans to increase cremation capacity and public columbarium facilities and invites Members' comments on the proposals to alleviate the problem of insufficient niches.

Background

2. On 8 November 2005, we consulted this Panel on the plans to expand public crematorium and columbarium (C&C) facilities to meet increasing public demand, as follows -

- (a) To re-provision in phases all existing cremators in the public crematoria at Diamond Hill, Wo Hop Shek and Cape Collinson, for commissioning between 2006 and 2014;
- (b) To provide within the next decade a total of 170,600 new niches in the public columbaria at Cape Collinson, Kwai Chung, Wo Hop Shek, Diamond Hill, Cheung Chau and Sha Tin (Fu Shan); and
- (c) Other proposed measures, including -
 - (i) To introduce new designs to columbaria commissioned from 2009 onwards with a view to delivering a large number of niches;
 - (ii) To explore the possibilities for the best way forward in developing Tuen Mun Area 46 for C&C purposes;
 - (iii) To encourage bereaved families to dispose of the ashes of the deceased at the Garden of Remembrance (GOR);

- (iv) To introduce a time-limited lease of niches in lieu of perpetual interment of cinerary urns in newly allocated niches; and
- (v) To encourage the non-Government sector including the private sector to play a more active role in providing private crematoria/columbaria for use by the public on a commercial or not-for-profit basis.

Progress on Crematorium Projects

3. In paragraph 2(a) above, we planned to re-provision a total of 24 cremators by 2014. We are progressing well. Details of the re-provisioning projects are given below.

Diamond Hill

4. Due to inclement weather, the target completion date of the re-provisioned cremators at Diamond Hill Crematorium has been slightly deferred from end-2006 to the second quarter of 2007.

Wo Hop Shek

5. In the consultation in early 2006, North District Council (DC) Members had no in-principle objection to the re-provisioning proposal but requested to be further consulted when more project details were available. We are conducting an Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) study and working on preliminary design for re-provisioning a total of nine cremators in two phases. We will consult the DC again later this year.

Cape Collinson

6. We consulted the relevant DC in early 2006 on the re-provisioning of the 12 old cremators with nine new ones. Members supported the proposal generally but were concerned about the resultant increase in vehicular flow throughout the year. We subsequently commissioned a consultant to conduct a Traffic Impact Assessment (TIA) study which concluded that the project would not have significant adverse traffic impact on the area. In addition, we have proposed to build one more new cremator in Phase 2 to re-provision the existing one for the exclusive use of Hindus and the DC has raised no objection to the proposal. Upon completion of the whole re-provisioning project, there will be a total of 10 new cremators. We plan to conduct an EIA study later this year.

Overall Projection

7. If the above three projects proceed smoothly, we estimate that by 2014, the total annual cremation capacity of the 34 public cremators will be increased to 54,750 sessions, and will fully meet the projected demand of 43,300 sessions. The waiting time for cremation may then be reduced from the current 15 days to 13 days. However, during the interim period before the commissioning of the re-provisioned cremators at Wo Hop Shek and Cape Collinson, we may experience a shortfall of supply of cremation sessions in 2009. If circumstances warrant, we can adjust the operating hours of the crematoria to meet demand.

Progress on Columbarium Projects

8. In paragraph 2(b) above, we planned to provide within the next decade a total of 170,600 new public niches. We have come across transport and other physical constraints and also strong local/DC objections in some of the proposed sites. Details of the progress in various sites are given below.

Progress in 2006

9. We have built a total of 7,000 niches at the columbaria at Cape Collinson, Kwai Chung and Wo Hop Shek in 2006. Another 1,000 niches will be available at Cheung Chau Columbarium in early 2007.

Projects in 2007/2008

10. Works for the 18,500-niche project at Diamond Hill Columbarium have commenced in July 2006, while that for the 3,200-niche project at Kwai Chung Columbarium will commence in the second quarter of 2007. The project to build 2,900 niches in three small sites along the roadside to Gallant Garden in Wo Hop Shek Cemetery will be presented to the DC concerned in early 2007. Upon completion of these three medium-term columbarium projects, a total of 24,600 new niches will be provided by 2008.

Longer Term Project

11. We have earlier informed the North DC that we planned to build a columbarium at a present carpark site within Wo Hop Shek Cemetery to provide 31,500 niches by 2010. We will consult the DC in early 2007 upon completion of a TIA study on the proposed project.

Projects Pending Further Review

12. In view of transport and other physical constraints and/or strong local/DC objections, the following columbarium projects yielding a total of 106,500 niches may not be able to proceed as scheduled -

- (a) the planned provision in 2006 of 3,000 niches at two hillside sites in the Wo Hop Shek Cemetery;
- (b) the planned provision by 2011 of 42,000 niches at a site near the Gallant Garden within the Wo Hop Shek Cemetery ;
- (c) the planned provision by 2011 of 17,500 new niches at Fu Shan Columbarium ; and
- (d) demolition of the old crematorium and the planned in-situ construction by 2010 of 44,000 niches at Kwai Chung Crematorium.

New Proposed Projects to meet the Anticipated Shortfall

13. Taking into account the difficulties in implementing the above proposed projects, the revised additional provision of new public niches that could be made available within the next decade is estimated to be around 57,000 and would unlikely meet the projected annual demand of 20,000 odd public niches. There will be an annual shortfall of 17,000 to 24,000 niches in three of the next five years if no more additional columbaria is to be built, though experience tells that a certain portion of the shortfall would be picked up by private or non-government service providers, such as the Board of Management of Chinese Permanent Cemeteries.

14. In view of the above, alternative plans need to be identified to meet the anticipated shortfall. We are now exploring the feasibility of developing a site at Kiu Tau Road in Wo Hop Shek Cemetery hitherto held as a longer term development. We are assessing the development potential of the site and will consult the North DC when we have more details.

15. We have conducted an initial consultation with the Tuen Mun DC on our proposal of developing C&C facilities at Tuen Mun Area 46. Despite the fact that the proposed area is over 1 km from the nearest residential development and we have committed to brend in the design of the C&C facilities with the neighbouring environment, we still met with strong objection from DC members and some residents, raising various concerns such as traffic impact, adverse visual and psychological impact. We have tried to identify other sites suitable for possible expansion of columbarium development. Planning Department has conducted a

territory-wide site search but confirmed that Tuen Mun Area 46 is the only suitable new site for C&C purpose at present. In view of the public interest involved, there is a pressing need for us to continue with the proposal to meet the serious shortfall of niches in the coming years. We will conduct detailed feasibility studies on and assess the development potentials of our plans and will make best endeavours to address the concerns of DC members and local residents. We will consult the DC again when we have more details of the project proposals.

Measures Proposed to Alleviate the Shortage of Government Niches

New Designs for Columbarium Blocks

16. We will take forward the new designs for columbaria blocks as proposed in LC Paper No. CB(2) 270/05-06(03). To address the specific concerns of the nearby community with regard to possible visual and psychological impact generated by the C&C facilities, we are improving the design of these facilities by various means, such as maximizing greenery effect, beautifying the structures by matching the design with the neighbouring environment and adjusting the orientation of the building blocks and setting back the rows of niches. Wherever possible in the development of new columbarium projects, we would consider enhancing the landscape design and provision of sitting out areas to blend them with gardens or parks for the benefit of the community. To address the community's concerns on possible environmental and traffic impact, we will conduct detailed EIA, TIA and other feasibility studies to confirm the acceptability of the proposals before proceeding.

17. To upgrade the security of columbaria, closed-circuit television system will be provided for all new columbarium projects and has been extended to the existing facilities.

Garden of Remembrance (GOR) at Cape Collinson

18. To promote acceptance and wider use of the GOR, the pilot scheme at Cape Collinson will be ready for public use around April 2007. There will be a dedicated wall erected for mounting 2,000 plaques in memory of the deceased. Similar dedicated walls for mounting 570 plaques will also be provided in the reprovisioned Diamond Hill Crematorium. We will display information about the GOR in our Health Education Exhibition and Resource Centre and Mobile Education Centre at Kowloon Park. We will distribute promotional leaflets to members of the public through public mortuaries, homes for the aged, and non-government organisations providing care services to the elderly. We will also publicize the new facilities through the website of Food and Environmental Hygiene Department (FEHD).

Alternative Approaches for Urns

19. In the process of our consultation with DCs on the above C&C project proposals, we also consulted them on our proposal of ceasing the current practice of perpetual interment of cinerary urns and limiting the interment of cinerary urns in newly allocated niches to say, 10 years. The overall response was not favourable as it was considered that the proposals are at variance with Chinese customs. We would further consider the proposals in the light of the public feedback..

Role of the Non-Government Sector

20. We will continue to pursue the possibility of inviting the non-Government sector to participate in C&C developments at larger sites such as Wo Hop Shek and Tuen Mun Area 46.

Sea Burial

21. Sea burial has been practised in other places for some time (e.g. the Mainland). It is anticipated that more people might consider adopting sea burial as a means for disposing cremated ashes. According to the Public Health and Municipal Services Ordinance (PHMSO) (Cap 132), written permission of the Director of Food and Environmental Hygiene (DFEH) is required for scattering the ashes of any human remains after cremation, otherwise than in a cemetery.

22. To avoid any indiscriminate scattering activities around the shoreline of Hong Kong, we are considering with relevant bureaux/departments the feasibility of setting up a standard procedure for processing sea burial application at a few designated water areas which may be suitable for the purpose. We will impose appropriate approving conditions with a view to minimising marine traffic, noise or water pollution and psychological impact that may be caused by the sea burial ceremonies. Suitable publicity would be made upon the formulation of a sea burial scheme.

Measures to protect the environment

23. To protect the environment, we have issued guidelines to the funeral trade and bereaved families on the specifications of coffins suitable for cremation. These specify the size of the coffins and the material that should not be used in the making of coffins. The guidelines also advise the bereaved family not to place metal or plastic articles inside the coffin, and to remove all metal or plastic ornaments on the surface of it before cremation.

24. Any person who wishes to become an undertaker of burial has to apply for a licence from DFEH under section 92AB of the PHMSO (Cap 132) and to observe the relevant licensing conditions imposed, and any breach will result in the issue of a warning letter by FEHD.

25. To ensure compliance with the guidelines by undertakers of burials, FEHD plans to introduce a new licensing condition to the effect that an undertaker of burials shall only source and/or arrange a coffin for cremation for the bereaved family that meets with FEHD's requirements, and will issue warning letters to undertakers of burials who breach this condition. Accumulation of three warning letters within a period of 12 months will result in licence suspension. An accumulation of three warning letters within a period of 12 months after two consecutive suspensions will lead to licence cancellation. When effecting suspension/cancellation of licence, due consideration will be given to ensuring that no inconvenience is caused to bereaved families.

26. We have consulted the trade and coffin suppliers of the above proposal in October and December 2006. In principle, they did not object to the proposals but requested a grace period of 9 months for finding alternatives to and clearing of their existing/committed stock of coffins.

27. We plan to impose the additional licencing condition requiring an undertaker of burial to only source and/or arrange a coffin for cremation for the bereaved family that complies with FEHD's requirements as from 1 October 2007. Before the effective date, we will enhance publicity by informing all licensed undertakers of burial in writing, displaying notices on cremation booking offices and putting on educational messages on the website of FEHD.

Advice Sought

28. Members are invited to note the latest progress of the C&C project proposals and to comment on the proposals to alleviate the shortage of niches.

**Health, Welfare and Food Bureau
Food and Environmental Hygiene Department
January 2007**