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Panel on Environmental Affairs

Meeting on 26 November 2007

Background brief on control of idling engines

Introduction

Many drivers in Hong Kong leave the engines of their vehicles idling while they are waiting. Other than those who do so for reasons acceptable to the public (for example, drivers of emergency vehicles who keep the engines of their vehicles running while stationary for operational reasons and drivers of goods vehicles with a built-in refrigerator carrying frozen foods), most others leave their engines on to keep the air-conditioning running for the comfort of themselves, particularly during hot weather, at the expenses of the air quality. A table comparing the emissions by an idling engine and an engine of a moving vehicle is given in the **Appendix**.

2. The Environmental Protection Department (EPD) has been conducting a public education campaign since 1997 aimed at promoting a good habit of keeping the engine off while waiting. EPD staff also take the campaign to the streets of the more polluted areas on days where the Air Pollution Index is very high to advise drivers of vehicles to switch off their engines while waiting. However, as keeping the engines off is not a legal requirement, drivers do not have to accept the advice given by EPD staff. This has prompted the question of whether control of idling engines by way of legislation should be introduced.

Public consultation

3. During the period from July 2000 to January 2001, the Administration consulted the 18 District Councils (DCs) and different sectors of the transport trade, including taxi and public light bus operators, truck drivers, public omnibus operators, school bus operators and operators of works vehicles, on the proposal to control idling engines. Issues, such as types of vehicles to be controlled, designation of no-idling zones and hours as well as setting of a maximum time limit for the engine to idle, had been raised.

4. Members of the 18 DCs generally agreed that control of idling engines could reduce the nuisance caused to nearby pedestrians by emissions from vehicles waiting on the roads. Many of them considered it impracticable to introduce a total ban on idling engines since some vehicles had to leave their engines running after coming to a stop due to practical, operational needs. Besides, the health of the driver and his passengers could be adversely affected if he has to switch off the engines, also the air-conditioning, while waiting in the hot weather. Some DCs members were worried that traffic and air pollution problems could be aggravated if drivers chose not to switch off their engines but to circulate on the road. Moreover, if the control scheme allowed a grace period during which a vehicle could keep its engine running after coming to a stop before its engine had to be switched off, enormous enforcement problems could arise. There was also suggestion that a reasonable transitional period should be provided to allow drivers to get used the new requirement if control was to be introduced.

5. While generally agreeing that control of idling engines should be implemented to reduce the nuisance caused by emissions from vehicles waiting on the road to nearby pedestrians and residents, the transport trade indicated that any across the board control scheme imposed on passenger vehicles that would require the air-conditioning of the vehicles to be switched off while they were waiting would cause discomfort to the driver and the passengers and thus adversely affect their operations.

Proposal to control idling engines

6. Based on the views collected, the Administration's assessment was that if a total ban was imposed on idling engines, some drivers, due to operational needs or in order to maintain the air-conditioning in the hot weather, might choose to circulate on the road instead of switching off their engines to circumvent the restriction, the pollution caused could offset the environmental benefits gained, or the air pollution problem could even deteriorate. Moreover, there were practical reasons for some vehicles, such as concrete mixers and emergency vehicles, to keep their engines running after they had come to a stop. Hence, any control scheme should not affect the normal operations of such vehicles. Besides, an across the board control scheme would give rise to enforcement problems because it was not easy for an enforcement agent to judge accurately whether or not a vehicle had only just switched on its engine or for how long a vehicle had stopped with its engine idling.

7. One of the more practical options was to work on the areas where pedestrians and residents could be easily affected by emissions produced by vehicles waiting on the road. It was proposed that consideration could be given to drawing up codes of practice to require franchised buses, taxis and public light buses waiting at bus termini or taxi stands to switch off their engines when there were no operational needs to keep them on. For instance, franchised buses were to switch on their engines only a few minutes before boarding of passengers starts, all taxis/public light buses in the queue (except the few taxis/public light buses at the front of the taxi stand/public light bus terminus) must have their engines switched off.

Deliberations of the Panels

8. The proposal to control idling engines was discussed at two joint meetings of the Panel on Environmental Affairs (EA Panel) and the Panel on Transport on 12 May 2000 and 27 February 2001. Members generally supported the control of idling engines to protect public health. They pointed out that the Administration should not use practical or enforcement difficulties as an excuse for not implementing the control of idling engines. Some members pointed out that the proposed adoption of an advisory approach using published guidelines should only be intended as an interim measure, and that the use of enforcement legislation should be the way forward in the long term. In addition to the published guidelines, publicity programmes should also be conducted through the media. More emphasis should be put on the conservation of fuel that 3.5 litres of fuel per hour or \$3 per five minutes would be saved from switching off engines instead of idling them. Others however considered the use of enforcement legislation was impracticable and would cause unnecessary inconvenience to the public.

9. As regards the impact of the control scheme on the transport trade, some members stressed the need to strike a balance in formulating the control scheme to ensure that the transport trade would not be unduly affected. A phased implementation, starting first with private cars and extending to other vehicles at a later stage, would be appropriate. To solicit support from the trade, particularly tourist bus drivers who claimed that there was a need to keep their air-conditioning on for the comfort of passengers, there might be a need to provide more incentives and supporting facilities, such as sheltered waiting areas for the tourist buses and car parks for other vehicles, to prevent the idling of engines. To ascertain whether drivers would prefer to circulate on the road to circumvent the control scheme, consideration should be given to conducting a pilot scheme on a busy district to assess the preference of drivers.

10. According to the Administration, it preferred to establish a partnering relationship with the transport trade and did not wish to resort to punitive measures. For this reason, it would continue its dialogue with the trade and would introduce guidelines on the control as a first step. These guidelines would be subject to review and further plans to control idling engines would depend on the effectiveness of these guidelines.

11. The subject of control of idling engines was raised at the policy briefings by the Secretary for the Environment, Transport and Works for the EA Panel on 21 October 2005 and 23 October 2006. The Legislative Council also passed a motion on 7 December 2005 urging the Government to, among other things, introduce legislation to require motorists to switch off the engines of their vehicles while waiting and accord priority to regulate emissions from idling engines of private cars and government vehicles as well as idling engines of vehicles in school and hospital premises.

12. Members of the EA Panel generally considered that the approach adopted by the Administration in controlling idling engines was not proactive enough as evidenced by the increased number of complaints against idling vehicles. Some members held the view that statutory control was an essential tool to control idling vehicles. To minimize the impact on the trade, consideration could be given to implementing a limited ban on idling vehicles in selected areas, such as schools, hospitals and government buildings, which would be much easier than a territory-wide ban which would take years to complete. While appreciating the difficulties which some trades would encounter in complying with the control on idling vehicles, other members opined that the Administration should exercise strong governance to introduce a simple and direct legislation to ban idling vehicles across the territory without hesitation in an attempt to reduce vehicular emissions for the benefit of the environment. According to the Administration, it was committed to identifying practical measures to improve air quality but public support was crucial in implementing these measures and the affected trades had to be consulted. A public consultation exercise had been scheduled for early 2007.

Relevant papers

Information paper provided by the Administration for the joint meeting of the EA and Transport Panels on 12 May 2000

<http://www.legco.gov.hk/yr99-00/english/panels/ea/papers/1948e03.pdf>

Minutes of the joint meeting of the EA and Transport Panels on 12 May 2000

<http://www.legco.gov.hk/yr99-00/english/panels/ea/minutes/ej000512.pdf>

Information paper provided by the Administration for the joint meeting of the EA and Transport Panels on 22 February 2001

<http://www.legco.gov.hk/yr00-01/english/panels/ea/papers/a652e01.pdf>

Follow-up paper provided by the Administration

<http://www.legco.gov.hk/yr00-01/english/panels/ea/papers/a1666e.pdf>

Minutes of the joint meeting of the EA and Transport Panels on 22 February 2001

<http://www.legco.gov.hk/yr00-01/english/panels/ea/minutes/ea270201.pdf>

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**Comparison of Exhaust Emissions
between a Running Engine and an Idling Engine**

(Note: Assuming the vehicle is moving at a speed of 25 kilometres per hour and with the air-conditioning on.)

Emissions of a running engine as compared to those of an idling engine				
	Nitrogen Oxides	Particulates	Carbon Monoxide	Hydrocarbon
Private Car	Two times more	Difference negligible	23% more	25% more
Diesel Taxi	26% more	Four times more	40% more	One and a half times more
Diesel Light Bus	Double	Four times more	Double	Three and a half times more
Heavy Goods Vehicles	Double	13 times more	Double	Four times more