

For discussion
on 23 February 2009

**Legislative Council
Panel on Environmental Affairs**

**BANNING IDLING VEHICLES
WITH RUNNING ENGINES**

Purpose

At the Panel meeting on 15 January 2009, Members have asked the Administration to further consult the taxi trade on the revised proposal to ban idling vehicles with running engines (idling vehicles). This paper reports on the outcome of the further consultation, sets out our responses to the views raised at the afore-mentioned meeting and seeks Members' views on the way forward.

Further Consultation with Taxi Trade

(a) *Request for Full Exemption*

2. The taxi trade now considers that even fully exempting all taxis at a taxi stand would be inadequate to meet their operational needs. It is seeking to fully exempt all taxis from the proposed ban. The trade's main argument is that, due to insufficient taxi stands, many of the taxis have to stop at unofficial taxi stands waiting for passengers. Therefore unless full exemption is granted and air-conditioning is provided continuously, these taxis would not be able to provide the expected level of comfort to their passengers.

3. The taxi trade representatives have also reiterated the following arguments against the revised proposal –

- (a) the expansion of the proposed exemption for the first two taxis at a taxi stand to the first five would be insufficient to prevent taxis waiting at a taxi stand from repeated engine re-starting, which they believe would aggravate the wear-and-tear of the engine components. Anything short of a full exemption at a taxi stand would in their views not provide a satisfactory solution;

- (b) without continuous air conditioning during hot weather, the taxi drivers would easily fall sick and the hot taxi compartments would discourage patronage; and
- (c) on rainy and humid days, a taxi without air conditioning in operation would have its windscreen fogged up easily. This would compromise driving safety.

4. Indeed, implementing a mandatory ban on idling vehicles will cause some inconvenience to the drivers and passengers. The inconvenience has to be balanced against the environmental nuisances that idling vehicles cause to other users on the streets. Having regard to this factor, we have the following comments on the specific requests –

- (a) our proposals include exempting the first five taxis at a taxi stand, those taxis in a moving queue and taxis which are in the process of passenger boarding or alighting. The extent of exemption is in our view reasonable and would unlikely cause frequent engine stops and restarts; and
- (b) the taxi trade's suggestion on exemption due to extremely hot and rainy weather is noted. We understand that in Singapore and Japan where a mandatory ban on idling vehicles is in place, there is no exemption when the ambient temperature reaches a certain level or when it is raining, though their summer may even be hotter and more humid than Hong Kong's. The United Kingdom has no weather exemption either. For Canada, some municipalities (such as Toronto) will lift the ban when the ambient temperature exceeds 27°C. However, this is not a universal arrangement and other parts of Canada (such as Greater Vancouver Regional District and the City of Guelph) do not provide similar exemption.

(b) *Other Suggestions*

5. During the consultation, the taxi trade representatives deliberated among themselves the following proposals without reaching any consensus –

- (a) an additional taxi fare of \$10 per trip to subsidize owners to retrofit their taxis with electric air conditioning systems, and in the longer run, a grant scheme be introduced to replace all taxis

with hybrid models; and

- (b) trees be planted or shelters be constructed to provide shades to taxis at taxi stands.

Some representatives were worried about the increase in fuel cost should electric air conditioning systems be installed. Others also doubted its practicability. As for the second proposal, some representatives were concerned about its effectiveness and practicability as well.

6. Nevertheless, on the request for the Government to plant trees and construct shelters at taxi stands, we would convey this to the relevant Government bureaus and departments as part of the greening project and minor works programme in the districts.

Responses to Views of Other Transport Trades on Revised Proposal

7. At the Panel meeting on 15 January 2009, representatives of other transport trades put forward a number of proposals. Our responses are set out below.

(a) *Minibuses*

8. Deputations of the trade requested for a blanket exemption for all minibuses, particularly for red minibuses because of the inadequate number of minibus stands in the territory. For the same reasons as set out in paragraph 4 above, we do not agree to this proposal. The question of adequacy of red minibus stands should be pursued outside the context of the current proposal to ban idling vehicles.

(b) *Coaches, School Buses and Franchised Buses*

9. Some deputations requested the Government to exempt all coaches and school buses from the proposed ban, while others requested a grace period of 15 minutes for running the air conditioners to cool down the compartments before picking up passengers during hot weather. As the revised proposal would allow drivers to start the engines and run the air conditioners once they start picking up passengers, the compartments would begin to cool off. Weighing between the inconvenience to the passengers and the environmental nuisances that idling vehicles may otherwise cause to the pedestrians, we do not support the call for any further exemption.

10. At the Panel meeting, deputations of green groups and a Member suggested the Government to mandate all new coaches and franchised buses to be installed with unsealed windows. We will explore the feasibility of this proposal with the relevant departments, transport trades and vehicle suppliers.

(c) *Commercial Vehicles*

11. For commercial vehicles, there was a request to extend the proposed grace period arrangement from 3-in-60-minute to 10-in-60-minute. The grace period is to allow for the turbochargers of commercial vehicles to cool down before stopping. According to the engine manufacturers, three minutes are sufficient for the purpose. Thus, we do not consider it justified to extend the grace period.

12. For container trucks at container terminals, a deputation of a logistic company raised at the Panel meeting that it would be impractical to impose the proposed ban on them, as there could be hundreds of container trucks queuing up for loading and unloading goods and frequent restarting of their engines would damage the ignition systems. However, representatives of the trade have shown strong support to the proposed ban and urged the Government to introduce this initiative as soon as possible at the trade consultation meeting.

(d) *Government Vehicles*

13. A Member enquired whether the proposed ban would be applicable to government vehicles. In fact, the Government has long instructed all of its drivers to stop the engines of idling vehicles, or they may be subject to disciplinary action. The proposed ban would apply to all government vehicles, except if an exemption applies. For examples, vehicles and ambulances of the Fire Services Department which must have the engines running for carrying out fire fighting or rescue missions, and government recovery vehicles which must have the engines running for operating the mobile cranes and direction signboards while attending vehicle breakdowns would be exempted. To ensure compliance with the proposed ban, we would issue new guidelines to all government vehicle drivers when the legislation is passed

(e) *Exemption during Hot Weather*

14. A suggestion was raised at the Panel meeting that the proposed

ban should be lifted during summer, when the ambient temperature exceeds 27°C or when the Observatory has issued the “Very Hot Weather Warning”. Accepting the proposal will mean the proposed ban would not be enforced when environmental nuisances caused by idling vehicles are most serious amidst high ambient temperature.

Other Views Received

15. Some deputations of the transport trades, the green groups and the Civic Party expressed support for the revised proposal. A number of them urged the Government to introduce the legislation as soon as possible and not to provide any further exemption to the commercial vehicles or the effect of the proposed ban would be greatly diminished.

Way Forward and Advice Sought

16. Subject to any views that Members may have, including those regarding the suggestions on exemptions due to extremely hot weather and health reasons, we would prepare a draft bill for scrutiny by the Legislative Council within this year. Meanwhile, we will continue to roll out public education programmes to promote this good driving habit that helps reduce roadside pollution.

17. Members are invited to offer their views on the contents of this paper and the proposed way forward.

**Environmental Protection Department
February 2009**