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Panel on Food Safety and Environmental Hygiene

**Background Brief prepared by the Legislative Council Secretariat for the
meeting on 12 May 2009**

Development of columbarium facilities

Purpose

This paper gives an account of the past discussions by the Panel on Food Safety and Environmental Hygiene (the Panel) on the development of columbarium facilities.

Background

2. On 8 November 2005, the Administration consulted the Panel on the plans to expand public columbarium facilities to meet increasing public demand as follows -

- (a) to provide within the next decade a total of 170 600 new public niches at Cape Collinson, Kwai Chung, Wo Hop Shek, Diamond Hill, Cheung Chau and Sha Tin (Fu Shan); and
- (b) 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 crematorium and columbarium (C&C) purposes;
 - (iii) to encourage bereaved families to dispose of the ashes of the deceased at the Garden of Remembrance;
 - (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 columbaria for use by the public on a commercial or not-for-profit basis.

Deliberations of the Panel

3. On 9 January 2007, the Administration reported to the Panel the progress on columbarium projects as follows -

- (a) a total of 7 000 niches had been built at the columbaria at Cape Collinson, Kwai Chung and Wo Hop Shek in 2006. Another 1 000 niches would be available at Cheung Chau Columbarium in early 2007;
- (b) works for the 18 500-niche project at Diamond Hill Columbarium had commenced in July 2006, while that for the 3 200-niche project at Kwai Chung Columbarium would commence in the second quarter of 2007. The project to build 2 900 niches in three small sites along the roadside of Gallant Garden in Wo Hop Shek Cemetery would be presented to the District Council (DC) concerned in early 2007. Upon completion of these three medium-term columbarium projects, a total of 24 600 new niches would be provided by 2008;
- (c) North DC would be consulted on the plan to build a columbarium at a present carpark site within Wo Hop Shek Cemetery to provide 31 500 niches by 2010, upon completion of a Traffic Impact Assessment study on the proposed project; and
- (d) 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 might not be able to proceed as scheduled -
 - (i) the planned provision in 2006 of 3 000 niches at two hillside sites in the Wo Hop Shek Cemetery;
 - (ii) the planned provision by 2011 of 42 000 niches at a site near the Gallant Garden within Wo Hop Shek Cemetery;
 - (iii) the planned provision by 2011 of 17 500 niches at Fu Shan Columbarium; and
 - (iv) demolition of the old crematorium and the planned in-situ construction by 2010 of 44 000 niches at Kwai Chung Columbarium.

4. The Administration further advised that the revised additional provision of new public niches that could be made available within the next decade was estimated to be around 57 000 and would unlikely meet the projected annual demand of 20 000 odd public niches. There would be a shortfall of 17 000 to 24 000 niches in three of the next five years if no more additional columbarium was to be built, though experience showed 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. To meet the anticipated shortfall, the Administration was now exploring the feasibility of developing a site at Kiu Tau Road in Wo Hop Shek Cemetery and assessing the development potential of C&C facilities at Tuen Mun Area 46, despite strong objection from Tuen Mun DC.

5. In view of the difficulties in developing C&C facilities, some members asked the Administration whether consideration could be given to developing such facilities in outlying islands. The Administration considered it not feasible to do so, as the ferry companies would have great difficulties in providing adequate ferry service to meet the demand generated by the large number of grave sweepers during Ching Ming and Chung Yeung Festivals. Furthermore, many areas in the outlying islands came under the protected realm of country parks.

6. Hon WONG Yung-kan opined that instead of introducing a time-limited lease of niches, the Administration should consider providing some incentives to family members of the deceased to encourage them to return the vacated urns for re-allocation.

7. The Administration pointed out that as the price of public niches was around \$3,000 to \$4,000 each, even a 50% refund would not be very attractive. The Administration further pointed out that in view of the scarcity of land in Hong Kong, even if all the proposed columbarium projects, including the one at Tuen Mun Area 46, could be taken forward as planned, the additional provision of new public niches still could not meet the rising demand. As a long term measure to tackle the shortage of niches, the introduction of a time-limited lease of niches was worthy of consideration.

8. Concern was raised about the slow progress made by the Administration in encouraging the scattering of cremated human ashes as an alternative for ash disposal. The Administration advised that consideration was being given to streamlining the application process and simplifying the internal procedure within the Government for approving applications for scattering cremated human ashes at seas.

9. Noting the Administration's plan to press ahead with the feasibility studies on developing C&C facilities at Tuen Mun Area 46, Hon WONG Yung-kan asked how the Administration would address the various concerns of Tuen Mun DC such as traffic impact, adverse visual and psychological impact.

10. The Administration advised that attempts had been made to identify other sites suitable for possible expansion of columbarium development. The Planning Department had conducted a territory-wide site search but confirmed that Tuen Mun Area 46 was the only suitable new site for C&C purpose at present. In view of the public interest involved, there was a pressing need to continue with the proposal to meet the serious shortfall of niches in the coming years. The Administration would make best endeavours to address the various concerns of Tuen Mun DC and would consult the DC again when there were more details of the project proposals.

Recent development

11. The streamlined application procedures for scattering of human ashes at sea were implemented in July 2007, and approval will be granted by the Director of Food and Environmental Hygiene within five working days from the date of application for scattering human ashes within one of the three designated areas.

Relevant papers

12. Members are invited to access the Legislative Council website (<http://www.legco.gov.hk>) for details of the relevant papers and minutes of the meeting.