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Panel on Food Safety and Environmental Hygiene

**Updated background brief prepared by the Legislative Council Secretariat
for the meeting on 14 July 2009**

Reprovisioning of cremators in public crematoria

Purpose

This paper gives an account of the past discussions by the Panel on Food Safety and Environmental Hygiene (the Panel) on the reprovisioning of cremators in public crematoria.

Background

2. Due to limited land supply for coffin burials, the Government has been encouraging the public to adopt cremation in lieu of coffin burials as the means of disposal of dead bodies since the 1970s. At present, a total of six Government crematoria are open for public use, i.e. Cape Collinson Crematorium, Diamond Hill Crematorium, Fu Shan Crematorium, Kwai Chung Crematorium, Wo Hop Shek Crematorium (WHSC) and Cheung Chau Crematorium. Since 2000, the Food and Environmental Hygiene Department has committed in its performance pledge to arrange cremation sessions within 15 days of application and has been able to achieve this target so far.

3. To cope with the rising demand for cremation services, all eight cremators at Kwai Chung and Fu Shan Crematoria were replaced by more efficient ones in 2003 and 2004. All cremators at Diamond Hill, WHS and Cape Collinson have been/would be reprovisioned in phases to enhance the handling capacity and to improve control on their air emission, for commissioning between 2006 and 2014. According to the Administration, old standard cremators built before the 2000s normally handle three sessions per day, whereas new standard cremators built after 2000 can normally handle six sessions.

Past discussions

4. At the meeting on 9 January 2007, members were briefed by the Administration on the progress of reprovioning cremators in public crematoria as follows -

Diamond Hill

- (a) Due to inclement weather, the target completion date of the reprovioning of six cremators had been slightly deferred from end-2006 to the second quarter of 2007.

WHS

- (b) In the consultation in early 2006, North District Council (NDC) members had no in-principle objection to the reprovioning proposal but requested to be further consulted when more project details were available. The Administration was conducting an Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) study and working on the preliminary design for reprovioning a total of nine cremators in two phases. NDC would be consulted again in late 2007.

Cape Collinson

- (c) The Administration had consulted the relevant DC in early 2006 on the reprovioning 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. The Administration subsequently commissioned a consultant to conduct a Traffic Impact Assessment study which concluded that the project would not have significant adverse traffic impact on the area. The Administration had further proposed to build one more new cremator in Phase 2 to reprovion the existing one for the exclusive use of Hindus, and the DC had raised no objection to the proposal. Upon completion of the whole reprovioning project, there would be a total of 10 new cremators. An EIA study would be conducted in late 2007.

5. Members noted that if the above three projects proceeded smoothly, it was estimated that the total annual cremation capacity of the public cremators would be increased to 54 750 sessions by 2014, and would fully meet the projected demand of 43 300 sessions. The waiting time for cremation might then be reduced from the current 15 days to 13 days.

6. On the question as to why the waiting time for cremation might only be reduced from the current 15 days to 13 days despite the reprovioning work, the Administration clarified that 15 days was the longest waiting time. The

Administration further pointed out that the time taken for cremation services to be provided depended not only on the availability of cremation sessions, but also the preference of the applicants. For example, the time taken for cremation services to be provided might be longer before and after Lunar New Year, a period which had traditionally been a peak season for cremation, and if the time for conducting cremation was insisted on auspicious dates/weekends.

7. Some members, including Hon WONG Yung-kan, asked whether consideration would be given to constructing crematorium in outlying islands. The Administration responded that it might not be feasible to do so, as 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. Moreover, many of the areas in outlying islands came within the protected realm of country parks.

8. At the meeting on 11 November 2008, the Administration briefed members on its plan to reprovise in-situ at WHSC six coffin cremators, one skeletal cremator, three service halls and other ancillary facilities at a total estimated cost of about \$700 million. Members noted that if the reproviseing project was supported, it was envisaged that by its scheduled completion in late 2011/early 2012, the new cremators and the facilities constructed under the first phase of the reproviseing of Cape Collinson Crematorium, together with other crematoria, would increase the cremation capacity to a total of 43 000 sessions a year.

9. Whilst expressing support for the project, concern was raised that the waiting time for cremation services would be prolonged, as WHSC would be closed down to make way for the construction of the new crematorium.

10. The Administration advised that despite the reproviseing of WHSC, it should be able to continue to fulfil its performance pledge of arranging a cremation session within 15 days of application in overall terms. To cope with the rising demand for cremation service, the Administration had started a reproviseing programme for cremators since 2003. To date, it had replaced old cremators in Kwai Chung, Fu Shan and Diamond Hill Crematoria and had put in operation a total of 14 new cremators at these three venues. The handling capacity of new cremators was double that of the old cremators. The Administration further advised that during the reproviseing of WHSC, the operation hours of other crematoria would be adjusted as and when necessary to cope with demand.

11. Concern was also raised about the adverse impact of the reproviseed WHSC on the air quality of the North District, as the number of cremators at WHSC would be increased from the existing four to eight after reproviseing.

12. The Administration pointed out that -

- (a) the new cremators would be built in accordance with the latest environmental standards. It should be noted that the emission

standard regarding dioxin applicable for the new WHS cremators would be further tightened by 10 times compared with such standards applicable before 2006. Furthermore, in practice, the new cremators in the recently reprovisioned crematoria had demonstrated that their emissions were only one-tenth of the most recent standards. In other words, the actual emission level of dioxin by the new cremators was 100 times better than the pre-2006 standard. The environmental performance of the new cremators would also be regulated by the Specified Process Licence of the Air Pollution Control Ordinance (Cap. 311);

- (b) the new cremators would also be fitted with high temperature secondary combustion chambers to ensure complete combustion during the cremation process, and a flue gas filtering system to filter out particles and waste gases in the emissions from the cremators. Such a design was adopted for the new cremators at the recently commissioned crematoria, such as the Diamond Hill Crematorium, and had proven effective in reducing the emission of particles/waste gases and dark smoke and meeting the statutory environmental standards; and
- (c) air emissions from the new cremators would be kept under close monitoring and emission samples taken regularly for testing to ensure they met the stringent and most up-to-date requirements as approved. The Administration would regularly provide members of NDC with information on air emissions when the reprovisioned WHSC came into operation.

13. On the question of whether, and if so, what measures would be introduced to the reprovisioned WHSC to prevent staff from stealing things from the deceased, the Administration advised that a CCTV system at strategic locations would be installed in the reprovisioned WHSC to monitor backroom operations.

14. The reprovisioning project was approved by the Finance Committee of the Legislative Council (LegCo) on 13 February 2009.

Relevant papers

15. Members are invited to access LegCo website (<http://www.legco.gov.hk>) for details of the papers and minutes of the relevant meetings.