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LCQ18:GovWiFi Programme

Following is a question by the Hon Cheung Hok-ming and a written reply by the Secretary for Commerce and Economic Development, Mr Frederick Ma, in the Legislative Council today (February 20):

Question:

The Government has awarded a contract for the provision of wireless Internet access facilities at 350 government premises by June 2009 and since last month, tenants in about 120 public rental housing estates can enjoy free wireless Internet access service at designated areas within the estates. In connection with the promotion of wireless Internet access, will the Government inform this Council:

(a) whether it plans to provide free wireless Internet access in commercial districts so as to strengthen Hong Kong's status as an Asian business centre;

(b) whether it knows which Asian countries or cities provide free wireless Internet access for their citizens; if it does, of the details;

(c) whether it plans to provide any form of financial assistance to indigent families that cannot afford the expenses on purchase of personal computers and monthly charges for Internet access; and

(d) as some people are ignorant about the computer and Internet, whether the Government will organise in various districts free courses on basic computer operation and Internet surfing for them?

Reply:

Madam President,

Regarding the question raised by Hon Cheung Hok-ming, my reply is as follows:

(a) The Government has earmarked some \$217 million for the "GovWiFi" Programme which will progressively roll out free Wi-Fi wireless broadband Internet services at some 350 government premises with high public patronage between March 2008 and mid 2009. Some of these government premises are located in commercial districts.

The Government also encourages private service providers to provide Wi-Fi services at commercial premises in accordance with the market needs. Whether the services are charged or not is a business decision of the service providers. To facilitate the industry in providing and extending the coverage of wireless service and network, the Government offered public facilities such as flyovers and lamp posts at nominal rent for network operators to install wireless access points. At present, there are some 6,400 Wi-Fi hotspots serving over 4,100

locations in Hong Kong. In major commercial districts, such as Yau Tsim Mong, Central and Western, and Wan Chai districts, the private service providers have already operated over 1,000 Wi-Fi hotspots to provide commercial Wi-Fi services to the public and businesses.

As a result of the Wi-Fi initiatives in both the private and public sectors, we expect that ubiquitous access to Internet services would be provided in most built-up areas, including commercial districts, of Hong Kong.

(b) In Asia, Singapore and Taiwan have launched programmes to provide public Wi-Fi services in the cities. Some of these services are free of charge. An overview of their programmes are provided below:

Taiwan:

In October 2003, the Taiwan Government allocated NT\$37 billion (approximately HK\$8.9 billion) for the M-Taiwan project. One of the project objectives is to build up a wireless telecommunications infrastructure for wireless Internet access. The project will provide wireless broadband Internet services in 10 cities including Taipei, Kaohsiung and Taichung, together with 15 special mobile districts. The wireless networks will cover major public areas such as railway stations and department stores, etc. This project adopts the Public-Private-Partnership approach for operations. Individual service providers have different charging models for their respective services.

According to information on the Taiwan Government's website, the Taichung City Government is offering free Wi-Fi services to the public. We do not have related information of other cities in Taiwan at present.

Singapore:

The Singapore Government has launched a 3-year Wireless@SG programme to provide Wi-Fi services to its citizens progressively between January 2007 and December 2009. Citizens can use the basic services, which only provide bandwidth of 512kbps or below, free of charge before December 2009. Users are required to pay for services with higher bandwidth, and the free services will no longer be offered after December 2009. This programme also adopts the Public-Private-Partnership approach for operation. The Singapore Government will spend SG\$30 million (HK\$151 million) while the operators have to invest SG\$100 million (HK\$504 million) on implementing the programme. The services will be available in most parts of Singapore except residential areas. The programme covers the main shopping belt, the central business district and major town centres.

(c) In recent years, the Government has been implementing a number of initiatives to help the needy people (including those from indigent families) to access and adopt information technology (IT). For example, during 2005-2007, the Government collaborated with the Hong Kong Council of Social Service to implement a Computer Recycling Scheme under which students from low-income and indigent families were provided with recycled computers after refurbishment and with one-year free Internet connection. At present, about 96% of primary and secondary school students have access to computers at home, mostly with

broadband connectivity. The Government will continue the Computer Recycling Scheme, and will discuss with telecommunications companies to offer students under this Scheme Internet connection service at a concessionary rate after the initial year of free connection.

The Government has also set up the Central Fund for Personal Computers to assist people with disabilities having financial difficulty in acquiring personal computer and required facilities to enable them to lead a more independent life. On the other hand, the Government provides about 5,600 personal computers with Internet connection at about 1,000 convenient locations across the territory for free access by the people in need such as members of indigent families. In addition, the Government has joined hands with non-government organisations (NGOs) to set up district cyber centres to provide free access to computer and the Internet for the public including members of indigent families.

(d) Under the "IT Hong Kong" campaign which has been running since 2000, the Government has been promoting the awareness and wider adoption of IT in the community, as well as educating the public about appropriate IT ethics. Free IT awareness and basic training courses including PC usage, Internet surfing and information security have been organised for all sectors of the community, including the elderly, female homemakers, new arrivals and people with disabilities. So far, more than 100,000 people have participated in these courses.

In addition, the Government has joined hands with non-government organisations (NGOs) to set up district cyber centres to enhance accessibility of information and communication technology and to provide training opportunities for the public, the under-privileged groups in particular. We will also explore with the private sector and NGOs the possibility of setting up more cyber centres staffed by people with technical knowledge to help the public gain access to online information and services, as well as educate them about relevant knowledge.

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