

Chapter IX : Transport

9.1 At the Chairman's invitation, the Secretary for Transport (S for T) Mr Nicholas NG, briefed members on the expenditure in the area of transport as highlighted in the 2000-2001 Budget (Appendix V-8).

Transport Planning and Development

9.2 On the Second Railway Development Study (RDS-2), Mr LAU Chin-shek enquired about the reasons for a delay in the scheduled completion date from the end of 1999 to the second quarter of 2000, as well as the details of the future railway expansion plans, particularly the development of the East Kowloon Line. Pointing out that the initial target was for its completion by end-1999 or early-2000, S for T said that RDS-2 would be finalized shortly according to schedule. A number of potential new railway lines had been identified for further evaluation in RDS-2, including the North Hong Kong Island Line, the East Kowloon Line, the Fourth Rail Harbour Crossing, the second rail link between Tai Wai and the urban areas and a rail link between North East New Territories and North West New Territories. The priorities and sequence of development of the various railway schemes would also be assessed in the context of the study.

9.3 Mr TAM Yiu-chung enquired about the details of the Tuen Mun and Yuen Long district traffic study. The Commissioner for Transport (C for T) advised that the major issues to be investigated in the study would include the capacity problem of roads and footpaths in the areas; safety problems at the Light Rail Transit (LRT) junctions and platforms and other road junctions; possible extension of LRT; the opening of new strategic roads linking to other parts of Hong Kong; impacts from the proposed strategic growth area development in Hung Shui Kiu; impacts due to the opening of the West Rail; weekend and holiday traffic; the implementation of new transport infrastructure; overnight parking of lorries and containers; and the environmental aspects of land development. The study was expected to be completed by the end of the year.

9.4 Noting that \$730 million and \$800 million had been earmarked for the detailed design of Route 9 and Route 10 respectively, Mr Lee Kai-ming expressed concern about the enormous provision in this respect. The Director of Highways (D of Hy) clarified that apart from the detailed design of the projects, the provisions also covered the estimates for the associated site investigation and supervision undertaken by the consultants during the implementation stage. The

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payment of design fees would be spread out over a number of years. With regard to the detailed design of the projects, he said that it would take at least two years to complete. On the selection of consultancy, D of Hy advised that the majority of the consultancy firms being selected had been operating in Hong Kong for a number of years and had engaged a substantial number of local employees.

9.5 Mrs Miriam LAU referred to a consultancy study to be commissioned to examine the future development of ferry services within Hong Kong and noted that \$2 million would be incurred to study changes in ferry passenger demand and expectations, land use and transport infrastructure and the financial viability of ferry services. She pointed out that a general study of this nature would not be meaningful as it might not come up with a solution to the problems faced by internal ferry services which were commonly known already. S for T replied that the study was undertaken at the request of Members of the Legislative Council to examine whether new developments for ferry services could be introduced. Subject to Members' views, the Administration could always re-consider its proposal and not to proceed with the study.

9.6 Mrs LAU expressed her disappointment with the Administration's attitude and stressed that it was irresponsible for the Administration to tackle the problems in such a negative manner. She added that the study should be specifically focused on the means to address the problems already identified such as its co-ordination with other public transport services and the provision of the necessary supporting facilities. In reply, S for T said that the existing waterborne transport policy was to maintain essential ferry services to the outlying islands and it was for the market force to determine its future development of inner harbour routes. The study would aim at covering a wide range of issues relating to the operation of ferry services with a view of identifying potential areas of development to meet overall transport demand.

9.7 Expressing concern on the delay in the completion of the feasibility study on electronic road pricing (ERP), Mr CHENG Kar-foo sought explanation from the Administration on the difficulties encountered during the study. In reply, C for T said that there had been some slight delays as a result of the impact of the economy on traffic projections in the last few years. The first part of the study which dealt with the technological aspects of ERP had already been completed. The second part which involved the considerations to be taken into account for the implementation of ERP was already at a very advanced stage. S

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for T supplemented that the focus of the feasibility study was on the application of the technology of ERP, rather than the need for its implementation. However, the study would also cover the related issue of whether ERP would be necessary in view of the existing traffic condition and traffic growth and, if so, the possible timing of implementation. The preliminary findings indicated that ERP would not be required on traffic management grounds until a considerable time in future. Depending on future developments, the Administration might pursue ERP in certain congested areas as and when necessary. He assured members that the Administration would make an effort to finalize the study as soon as possible.

9.8 Responding to Mr CHAN Wing-chan's question about promoting Hong Kong's transport infrastructures in overseas countries, S for T said that such activities could attract foreign investment and participation in Hong Kong's development. In the coming year, promotional road shows had been planned for North America.

Cross-border traffic

9.9 In view of the tremendous increase in the volume of cross-border traffic over the years, S for T drew members' attention to the various measures being taken by the Administration to ensure the efficient operation of cross boundary traffic and transport facilities including the upgrading of station facilities at Lo Wu and tidal movement of passengers during peak periods. Given the role of the railway as the predominant cross-border passenger carrier, a new rail passenger crossing at Huanggang/Lok Ma Chau was proposed.

9.10 Mr SIN Chung-kai considered that long-term planning should also be made for cross-border traffic generated by private cars. For the promotion of business activities, the Administration should consider introducing measures to facilitate the taking of cross-border day trips by local businessmen. In reply, S for T assured members that major projects were being planned to alleviate the situation. However, it would take time before results could be seen. S for T further advised that the most pressing need was generated by freight traffic. Due to physical constraints, it would not be possible to rely solely on the existing three road crossings to provide additional vehicular crossing capacity. Hence, active discussion on the feasibility of more road crossings were being held with the Mainland authorities.

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9.11 Responding to Mr CHAN Kam-lam's questions about cross-boundary infrastructural projects, S for T clarified that on-going discussions held with the Mainland authorities were for the construction of a footbridge connecting the terminals of the Sheung Shui/Lok Ma Chau Spur Line and the Shenzhen Metro, as it would not be possible to connect the West Rail with the Shenzhen Metro. Scheduled to be completed in 2004, the Huanggang/Lok Ma Chau passenger footbridge project would help to relieve the congestion at Lo Wu. As for the provision of a car park in the border area, S for T advised that no such plan was being contemplated due to geographical constraints. However, the Administration would continue to explore all possibilities taking into account the actual need of cross-boundary infrastructure.

Fare increases

9.12 Miss Emily LAU referred to the Administration's assessment that with the gradual recovery of Hong Kong's economy and increasing costs for some of the operators, a total of 92 fare increase applications was expected to be received from public transport operators in 2000-2001. She questioned whether it would serve to encourage public transport operators to increase fare which might run against the principle laid down by the Financial Secretary in his Budget Speech where the Administration was committed to first dealing with fee revisions for public services that did not directly affect people's livelihood or general business activities.

9.13 While stressing that the Government would never encourage public transport operators to increase fare, S for T pointed out that some operators were indeed faced with operational difficulties, particularly in increasing labour and fuel costs. When operators applied for an increase in fares in accordance with law or their operating agreements, such applications would be carefully considered on their merits, taking into account factors such as the company's operational costs and fair return, ridership, public affordability and general economic situation. As fare increases would certainly have an effect on people's livelihood, the Administration would strive to maintain a right balance between the interests of the operators and the commuting public. Fare increase applications had been received from the Hong Kong Tramways, New Territories taxis and some licensed ferry operators, it was not certain whether similar plans were being contemplated by other transport operators. C for T also clarified that 92 applications were not

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intended to be a target or even an estimate. Judging from previous figures, the total number of applications would fluctuate according to the prevailing economic condition.

Road safety

9.14 Noting that the number of accidents per million vehicle-km had been kept at the same level for three consecutive years, Mr LEE Wing-tat queried the Administration's complacency in not taking more proactive measures to enhance road safety. He was particularly concerned about the accidents caused by young drivers who had recently passed their driving tests. In response, S for T stressed that great importance was attached to improving road safety and over the years, new initiatives had been proposed, including the tightening of drink-driving legislation and the extension of the scope of seat-belt regulation, etc. In fact, the number of fatalities in traffic accidents had been on the decline over the past five years. Moreover, Hong Kong's situation was better than many other cities such as Singapore and Bangkok. Hence, the indicator quoted might not fully reflect the effectiveness of measures taken in this regard. S for T further advised that bills and regulations to control the use of hand-held mobile phones while driving, to increase the penalty levels for serious speeding offences, to substitute reckless driving by dangerous driving and to issue probationary driving licence to inexperienced motor-cyclists had been submitted to the Legislative Council for scrutiny. The passage of these legislative proposals coupled with the necessary enforcement and public education would further enhance the safety of both drivers and pedestrians. On measures to prevent accidents caused by inexperienced drivers, C for T explained that motor-cyclists were chosen as an initial target for the issue of probationary driving licences because the problem they presented was more serious than that of inexperienced private car drivers.

9.15 On Mr LAU Kong-wah's enquiry about the extension of seat belt regulation, C for T advised that the current built of public light buses (PLBs) did not support the proper installation of seat belts. Discussions were being held with the manufacturers of PLBs to modify the built within reasonable expenses. Moreover, the Administration would continue to explore other in-vehicle protection measures to enhance passenger safety. C for T also took note of Mr LAU's suggestion that the technical difficulties in installing seat belt on public light buses might be resolved if the maximum 4-tonne gross vehicle weight of

PLBs could be relaxed.

Licensing of driving instructors

9.16 Responding to Mr CHAN Wing-chan's enquiry about the review on the provision of driving instructor licences, C for T said that the driving instructor trade had been consulted. There was general support for the key proposals, including the organization of the existing 7 types of private driving instructor (PDI) licences into 3 groups. As regards the issue of new PDI licences, the Administration considered that there was no immediate pressure to do so for the time being and the existing position should be maintained. However, a limited and controlled number of new PDI licences would be issued in due course to maintain a sufficient supply of PDIs.

Environmental concerns

9.17 Mr Edward HO enquired about the measures taken to promote the use of environmentally-friendly vehicles in Hong Kong such as electric or hybrid vehicles. S for T advised that the subject matter was under the direct purview of the Secretary for Environment and Food. He, however, assured members that the Administration would closely monitor the development of any clean alternative technologies that could be put into practice locally and would offer appropriate help and assistance to facilitate their introduction into Hong Kong. One incentive would be the exemption of first registration tax as stated by the Financial Secretary in his Budget Speech. At the moment, a number of companies were experimenting with the use of electric vehicles. However, the timing of commercial sale of such vehicles and their pricing would be business decisions to be taken by the concerned companies.

9.18 On the adoption of new technology, the Chairman also queried why it took so long for the Administration to test a proven technology adopted elsewhere such as the use of hybrid vehicles. C for T advised that unlike the case in overseas countries, there were special characteristics to be tested for new types of vehicles in Hong Kong, given the high population density and the associated safety requirements.

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9.19 Mrs Miriam LAU expressed grave concern about the inadequate supply of liquefied petroleum gas (LPG) filling stations which had seriously hampered the implementation of LPG taxi scheme. She commented that the Transport Bureau should take a proactive approach in resolving the problem faced by the taxi trade. C for T remarked that the Administration was well aware of the importance of providing adequate refilling stations for the operation of LPG taxis and had been working on the captioned subject. With the provision of adequate supporting facilities, the use of LPG could be further extended to cover public light buses.

Road maintenance

9.20 Miss Emily LAU referred to the increasing number of complaints in 1999 against the problem created by road opening works and remarked that this long standing problem was getting worse despite the efforts and monies spent in the past to address the issue. She enquired about the effectiveness of the actions taken in the past and whether common-user ducts under roadways could be constructed to minimize road excavation. D of Hy replied that as a result of rapid development and redevelopment of the territory and the many different kinds of utility trunking and cables underground, a certain extent of disruption caused by road openings was inevitable despite active co-ordination and monitoring. He further informed members that there were about 60 000 road opening works every year. To reduce the disruption caused by road openings, a computerized system (Utility Management System) was in place to co-ordinate and monitor road opening by utility operators. Under the present arrangement, utility works had to be carried out immediately one after another so as to reduce the disruption caused by road openings whilst maintaining sufficient road widths for traffic and pedestrian movements. Hence, sometimes, for a particular location, utility works might appear to have been going on for a period of time, but in fact this was because different utility undertakings had to carry out their own works sequentially due to the traffic constraint. Indeed, Highways Department had already assigned supervisory staff to conduct regular inspections on utility works. With regard to the increase in the number of complaints, D of Hy explained that it might partly be the result of wider publicity on the complaint channels.

9.21 Miss Emily LAU considered that the present arrangement was

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unacceptable. Instead of scheduling different utility undertakings to carry out their own works sequentially, arrangements should have been made to allow them to carry out their works at the same time. Acknowledging members' views that the situation was far from satisfactory, S for T said that each utility operator would require a certain amount of space to effect their work, and hence, it would be difficult, if not impossible to put them all in the work site. He, however, agreed that further improvements would be required. At members' request, D of Hy undertook to provide an information paper detailing the control of road opening works and the reasons of apparent unattendance of road opening sites.

9.22 Mr Howard YOUNG was concerned about the visual intrusion associated with the use of dark colour spray concrete for slope stabilization works and enquired whether other colours could be used to complement the natural environment. D of Hy explained that spray concrete of different colours, such as green and brown, had been used. However, the colouring could be affected by natural erosion and oxidation. Other means, such as planting at the bottom and the face of the slopes, were being implemented to enhance the aesthetics of shotcreted roadside slopes.

Staffing position

9.23 On the deletion of 1 directorate post and 7 non-directorate posts in the Transport Department (TD) in 2000-01, C for T explained that the former was a supernumerary post which would lapse on the completion of the ERP study. On the reduction of other posts, the figure represented the net total of various creation and deletion of posts within the department. For posts to be created, 18 were for implementing the pedestrian schemes and carrying out the enhanced vehicle smoke tests. For posts to be deleted, 3 were related to the completion of the Airport Core Programme, 2 related to the computerization of the driving test appointment system and 4 related to the Enhanced Productivity Programme. 16 posts were also frozen to allow for the recruitment of contract staff.