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LegCo Panel on Environmental Affairs

**Minutes of meeting
held on Friday, 8 October 1999, at 8:30 am
in the Chamber of the Legislative Council Building**

- Members present** : Hon Christine LOH (Chairman)
Hon HUI Cheung-ching (Deputy Chairman)
Hon Martin LEE Chu-ming, SC, JP
Hon Margaret NG
Hon Ronald ARCULLI, JP
Hon CHEUNG Man-kwong
Hon CHAN Wing-chan
Dr Hon LEONG Che-hung, JP
Hon Mrs Sophie LEUNG LAU Yau-fun, JP
Hon WONG Yung-kan
Hon LAU Kong-wah
Hon Mrs Miriam LAU Kin-yee, JP
Hon CHOY So-yuk
Hon Andrew CHENG Kar-foo
Hon LAW Chi-kwong, JP
- Non-Panel members attending** : Hon James TIEN Pei-chun, JP
Hon SIN Chung-kai
- Members absent** : Ir Dr Hon Raymond HO Chung-tai, JP
Prof Hon NG Ching-fai
Hon Emily LAU Wai-hing, JP
- Public officers attending** : Mr Gordon SIU
Secretary for Planning, Environment and Lands

Mr Rob LAW
Director of Environmental Protection

Mrs Lessie WEI
Director of Agriculture and Fisheries

Mr Bosco FUNG
Director of Planning

Mr C T LEUNG
Director of Electrical & Mechanical Services

Mr H B PHILLIPSON
Director of Water Supplies

Mr Howard CHAN
Principal Assistant Secretary for Planning,
Environment and Lands (Environment)

Clerk in attendance : Miss Odelia LEUNG, Chief Assistant Secretary (1)1

Staff in attendance : Ms Pauline NG, Assistant Secretary General 1
Mrs Mary TANG, Senior Assistant Secretary (1)2

I Policy briefing by Secretary for Planning, Environment and Lands on the Chief Executive's Policy Address 1999 in respect of environmental matters

A set of colour prints entitled "Clear Water, Blue Sky" provided by the Administration was tabled at the meeting.

2. At the invitation of the Chairman, the Secretary for Planning, Environment and Lands (SPEL) gave a very brief introduction, saying that in order to achieve environmental objectives, there should be continued efforts in ensuring sustainability in development, enhancing cooperation with the Guangdong authorities and promoting active participation of the community.

Effectiveness of environmental programmes

3. Miss Margaret NG said that as a new member of the Environmental Affairs Panel, she would find it helpful if there were readily available documents which evaluated the effectiveness of the environmental programmes implemented over the past

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years. SPEL agreed that such information would be very useful. He said that although an evaluative document was not readily available, the Planning, Environment and Lands Bureau made an annual report at the time of the Policy Address on the environmental objectives, initiatives to achieve the objectives, targets of achievement and the progress made. In response to members, the Administration would provide an information paper to explain the progress made in relation to air quality, water quality and waste management over the past years.

4. Mrs Sophie LEUNG opined that the Administration only showed concern about the environment after the change of sovereignty. As a result, Hong Kong lagged far behind other countries in formulating environmental strategies. She called on the Administration to promote actively environmental awareness and should not target at particular groups for punitive actions to achieve the environmental objectives. In response, SPEL said that it was not a fair comment to say that the pre-1997 Administration had not been doing anything to protect the environment. The Administration had made many achievements on conserving and protecting the environment over the years and these included, amongst others, a 50% reduction in the level of pollutants emitted from power plants. The rapid increase in economic activities had brought about new environmental problems. He agreed that imposition of heavy fines alone could not resolve problems. The promotion of environmental awareness and community involvement was the way forward.

Community involvement

5. Mr Martin LEE said that the Administration should not assume a leadership role in implementing environmental policies. Educating the community alone was not adequate; the Administration should aim at engaging public participation. In this connection, he enquired about the Administration's plan to involve the community in the various environmental programmes. SPEL said that by supporting the various environmental programmes and providing advice to Government, LegCo members could lead the public to achieve the environmental objectives. Director of Environmental Protection (DEP) agreed on the need to involve green groups and other sections of the community in implementing environmental programmes. He said that over the past years, the Administration had been providing resources to green groups and other voluntary agencies to help in the public education programmes on the environment. In his Policy Address, the Chief Executive had announced that \$100 million grant had been set aside to support community initiatives on sustainable development, especially on educational programmes for citizens. The Administration was working out how to make the best use of the money.

6. Mr CHEUNG Man-kwong stressed the need for promoting environmental awareness and community involvement particularly amongst the younger generation. He sought information on how the \$100 million grant would be spent. DEP reiterated the Administration's recognition of the need for community involvement in order to maximise benefits. He said that a large number of environmental programmes for school

children had been organised over the years. In fact, a lot of students were actively involved in these programmes. As to the \$100 million grant, DEP said that this would be allocated under the Capital Account System and rolled on over a number of years. The Administration would consult the relevant bodies such as the to-be-established Council for Sustainable Development on how the money could be spent in the most cost effective way.

7. Mr CHEUNG Man-kwong called on the Administration to make best use of the \$100 million grant. He said that active participation was more effective than merely lecturing in cultivating environmental consciousness on the young generation.

8. DEP said that the Environmental Campaign Committee had been organising training camps for students. On the waste side, a pilot scheme for waste recycling projects had been implemented in 100 schools. If found to be successful, the scheme would be implemented in all schools. SPEL agreed with Mr CHEUNG that students were the best environment ambassadors.

Financial implications of environmental schemes

9. Mr CHAN Wing-chan expressed concern about the cost implications of implementing the various environmental initiatives. He was of the view that Government should shoulder a major part of the costs and should not transfer the costs to the public. Any charges imposed should be fair and reasonable and should not create a burden on the community.

10. DEP said that Government had been recovering a small fraction of the costs of building and operating most of the environmental infrastructure facilities. The Administration had invested heavily on landfills, refuse transfer stations and sewage facilities. For building landfills alone, the Administration had invested more than \$6 billion. There had not been any cost recovery schemes on the management of solid waste. In response to members, the Administration would provide a breakdown on the expenses incurred and costs recovered in the implementation of environmental infrastructure facilities.

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11. Mr Ronald ARCULLI enquired about the financial outlay in implementing the environmental policies as outlined in the 1999 Policy Address and how the costs would be shouldered by the business sector and the general public.

12. DEP said that much focus had been placed on the financial and economic implications of the various programmes. The total package of measures put forward, for example, to deal with the diesel emission problem, would not be placing a burden on the general citizen or the persons involved in the trade. In fact, some would be making profits out of the overall schemes. Members would be able to judge when the overall schemes were implemented. He added that the introduction of charging schemes would have cost implications on certain sectors of the community. Consultation would be

conducted with a view to setting up a reasonable charging arrangement. The Administration considered that it was about time that certain sectors of the community shared the responsibility for the costs of waste disposal. SPEL added that when considering the introduction of charges, for example, for waste disposal, the Administration would certainly take into account members' views to work out a fair and reasonable charging arrangement.

Waste management

13. On Mr LAU Kong-wah's enquiry about the anticipated costs of the waste-to-energy incineration programme, DEP said that the rough estimate for building two waste-to-energy incinerators would be about \$10 billion and 20% of which would be the cost for installing the necessary pollution emission control equipments in the incinerators. A detailed consultation paper setting out the cost estimate and the results of the Environmental Impact Assessment would be available by the end of the year.

14. Mr LAU Kong-wah said that since the implementation of the incineration programme would reduce waste management costs, he questioned the need to introduce domestic waste disposal charges. DEP said that at the moment, the Administration did not have a proposal to introduce charges for collection of domestic waste although there had been some thoughts about introducing charges for the disposal of other forms of waste. One of the main difficulties in waste management in Hong Kong was the lack of a charging arrangement for waste disposal which left no incentive for waste reduction or recycling. The imposition of charges for waste disposal would encourage waste minimisation and recycling. He stressed that landfills and incinerators were both expensive to build and operate.

15. SPEL pointed out that it had been a common practice for owners to dispose of fixtures in new flats. With the introduction of a charging scheme for waste disposal, they might have to think twice about disposing of these fittings. A charging scheme would not only result in waste reduction, but would also extend the service life of landfills.

16. Mr LAU Kong-wah queried if a charging scheme could result in waste reduction. He said that the introduction of sewage charges had not brought down water consumption. He requested for statistical information in this aspect. DEP said that the introduction of sewage charges would at least encourage industries to minimise the amount of sewage they produced.

(Post-meeting note: In response to Mr LAU's request, the Administration was of the view that a great many factors affect water consumption by industries, and it would not be possible to establish a precise relationship between the introduction of sewage charges and variations in water consumption.)

17. Mr SIN Chung-kai said that the Administration should take the lead in economising the use of paper and promoting electronic means of communication. He

was concerned about the progress of the provision of incineration facilities and their location. He pointed out that with the latest technological advances, the Administration should review the merits of waste-to-energy incineration. SPEL said that instead of providing a printed copy to members, the Administration set out the detailed environmental strategies in a compact disc. The disc would be deposited with the LegCo Secretariat and members who were interested could make reference. Regarding the waste to energy incineration facilities, DEP agreed that the siting of these facilities would pose a major difficulty. The Administration would base its proposal on a site which was considered the most environmentally acceptable.

Control of diesel emissions

18. Referring to paragraph 102 of the Chief Executive's Policy Address 1999, Mrs Miriam LAU considered it unfair that the Administration intended to introduce legislation to increase the fixed penalty for smoky vehicles to \$1,000 when the supporting measures to reduce smoky emissions had yet to be put in place. She pointed out that most diesel vehicles in use were pre-Euro standard vehicles which had high particulate emissions. Many projects to reduce emissions one way or the other were still at the trial stage. At present, Liquefied Petroleum Gas (LPG) mini-buses had yet to be made available in Hong Kong; the effectiveness of particulate traps and catalytic converters had not been fully tested on different types of vehicles; and vehicle mechanics had not been equipped with adequate knowledge in using the chassis dynamometers. Mrs LAU stressed that resolving emission problems needed time and it was inappropriate to increase the fine for smoky vehicles now. She queried if the proposed increase was a revenue raising measure. She also made it clear that she spoke on behalf of the transport industry and that her views did not represent the stance of the Liberal Party.

19. In response, SPEL said that the Administration was working in partnership with the transport industry to implement the necessary supporting measures. The proposed increase of fine for smoky vehicles to \$1,000 was reasonable having regard to the cumulative inflations over the years. The proposal aimed to increase the deterrent effect of the penalty, not to raise revenue.

20. DEP added that the existing penalty for excessive smoky emissions and the regulating standard had been in place for many years. The proposal to raise the penalty was not related to the use of the chassis dynamometers. The regulating standard was appropriate to pre-Euro standard vehicles if they were properly maintained. He agreed that the dynamometer test had highlighted the need to improve maintenance standards by mechanics. The Administration had been conducting programmes to educate drivers, mechanics and the trade associations on proper ways to maintain vehicles. It was aware of the difficulties faced by the trade and had been providing a grace period for compliance with the emission standards. Vehicles failing the dynamometer test had been treated leniently. It was hoped that there would be a marked improvement in maintenance standards over the next six months.

21. Mr Andrew CHENG was concerned that the problem of diesel emissions from buses, which was more serious than that from taxis and minibuses, had not been dealt with in the Chief Executive's Policy Address 1999. DEP advised that all franchise buses would be installed with catalytic converters. The bus companies had been very helpful in experimenting catalytic converters. He pointed out that the pollution contributed from buses, as compared with diesel taxis and light and heavy goods vehicles, was not as great. The Administration was having discussions with different companies on a variety of options, which included the import of ultra-low sulphur diesel and the introduction of electric trolley buses.

22. Mr LAW Chi-kwong said that the Administration should consider providing tax concessions to owners to encourage replacement of pre-Euro standard diesel vehicles. This would be more effective in improving air quality than providing grants to owners to install particulate traps which required cleaning every eight hours according to the trade. SPEL said that the Administration intended to brief members on the package of proposals on the replacement of the diesel vehicle fleet at the next Panel meeting on 5 November 1999 and an information paper on the subject would be issued to members by late October 1999.

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Indoor air quality

23. Mr HUI Cheung-ching enquired whether consideration would be given to imposing fines on owners of commercial premises failing to comply with indoor air quality standards. DEP that the present policy was to educate the public and to put in place codes of practice and certification schemes on indoor air quality for buildings. The Administration had not decided on the introduction or otherwise of a penalty system. It would review the success of the policy before proceeding further.

Strategic Sewage Disposal Scheme (SSDS)

24. Referring to DEP's letter to members regarding the re-convening of the International Review Panel (IRP) to review SSDS, Miss CHOY So-yuk expressed concern about the impartiality of IRP because its members were the same as those responsible for the review of SSDS in 1994/95. She suggested inviting more experts to sit on IRP, in particular those who had expressed different views when the SSDS project was under planning.

25. DEP said that there was no intention on the part of the Administration to conduct a rubber-stamp review exercise in an attempt to re-endorse the present plans. The Administration did not have any pre-conceived idea about the review and the review would be conducted in a sincere, open and transparent manner. The members of IRP were the most eminent people in the field of sewage strategies in the world and were extremely familiar with the SSDS project. It was estimated that IRP would take about nine months to complete the review. A lot more time would be required if completely

new people were involved. Nevertheless, the Administration would consider adding new blood to IRP. The Administration would soon put up details of the review proposal and would involve members, green groups and academics in the review process. DEP added that despite the difficulties encountered in Stage 1, the Administration still believed that the SSDS was a sound project. The project was considered the right way forward. The Administration however was open-minded. Should the outcome of the review show that there were more sustainable and effective ways to dispose of sewage, the Administration would surely consider.

26. SPEL said that noting the difficulties encountered with the project, the Administration considered it an opportune time to review the project before proceeding further. To increase the transparency of the review, the Administration would try to arrange meeting of the experts with the Panel.

27. The Chairman reminded members that the Panel had scheduled a special meeting on 28 October 1999 to discuss the SSDS project.

II Any other business

28. There being no other business, the meeting ended at 9:30 am.

Legislative Council Secretariat
3 November 1999