Letterhead of S.O.S. Save Our Shorelines Society

Presentation to the Legislative Council Transport Panel
Route 7 and a South Island Line for Southern District
21 September 2001

Save Our Shorelines (SOS) considers that Route 7 (R7), in both its original (dual 3 lane to Aberdeen) and current (dual 2 lane to Cyberport) form is unnecessary and environmentally damaging and that an alternative of a South Island Line (SIL) rail is a significantly better option from every perspective including transport, urban planning, finance, public health and the environment.

We have been urging the Administration to conduct a proper and comprehensive study of the alternative of rail to meet Southern District's transport needs. In light of the recent decision on Long Valley it is important that all alternatives to infrastructure projects are considered at an early stage in the planning process. While the Administration conducted a limited comparison of R7 to rail in the Third Comprehensive Transport Study[1], we do not consider this a fair evaluation, since the rail option considered was light rail not medium rail, and the Government continues to use an unrealistic assumption that rail service would reduce the peak hour private vehicle flow by only 3%.

We believe that members may have a number of misconceptions about the arguments for and against R7 and against an SIL rail. We would like to address these points in this paper.

1. Rail is NOT more expensive than R7

Our own study shows that there are two options for a medium capacity rail. The SIL could run from:

(i) Admiralty to Aberdeen and Ap Lei Chau with a spur line to Cyberport, OR

(ii) Sheung Wan via Cyberport, Wah Fu, Ap Lei Chau, Ocean Park in a circle and back to Wanchai or Admiralty.

Our estimates show that Option (i) would cost around HK$7-8 billion and Option (ii) around HK$9-10 billion. Most of the construction cost, along with all operation and maintenance costs, would be met by fares and property development opportunities, not taxpayers' money as would be the case for R7.

By our calculation, Transport Bureau's (TB) scaled down dual-lane R7 is likely to cost taxpayers HK$7-8 billion. We are surprised that TB chose not to give an indication of the cost involved in their Briefing Paper to the Legislative Council since it should know. This sum is similar to Option (i) for rail. None of this cost will be recaptured through user charges.

2. How to finance rail

The amount of direct government support for a SIL would be much less than the outlay for the scaled down R7. The amount of direct government support needed to make rail viable would probably be less than HK$4 billion.

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[1] Wilbur Smith Associates Ltd. Key Issue Paper 20. Testing of Replacing the Route 7 Road Project with a Passenger Rail Improvement. CE84/96. Report for Transport Bureau, SAR Government.

In other words, if the Government provided between HK$3 - $4 billion to a rail operator, the SIL would be otherwise fully financially viable. Put in another way, for less than 50% of the unrecoverable government cost for R7, Hong Kong can be served by a SIL.

In contrast, if the Government pushes ahead with spending HK$7-8 billion for R7, it will make a rail line highly uneconomic in the future although TB said it had not ruled it out. TB is being disingenuous in making such a claim.

Furthermore, we believe that TB will extend R7 to Aberdeen in the future. We believe that TB has proposed building it only to Pokfulum now in order to minimize public objections but in a couple of years, it will propose building the full length as originally envisaged for R7.

3. Benefits of Rail

- **Cost:** Less than half the cost to taxpayers than R7 and with more benefits.
- **Speed:** Passengers could reliably travel from Aberdeen to Admiralty in about 10 minutes in contrast to much more variable and often much longer times via R7.
- **Congestion:** R7 would seriously add to congestion in Central. Rail would lessen congestion.
- **Pollution:** Rail will produce less air and noise pollution. R7 will bring more vehicles into the area.
- **Safety:** R7 could result in at least 30 deaths and 200 serious injuries over 10 years. Rail is a safer option.
- **Shoreline:** Despite tunnelling through Mt Davis and putting the stretch at Cyberport underground, when R7 is build beyond Cyberport, it will ruin the shoreline beyond that. Rail will avoid destroying the shoreline.
- **Amenities:** Allow shoreline development for amenity uses, such as bicycle paths, promenades, outdoor cafes, and sitting out areas.
- **Property:** Values (along with retums to the Government) would be improved by rail.
- **Equity:** More people will benefit from rail.

4. Rail is more fair to more people

Our estimates show that a railway will have far greater capacity (perhaps double) that of R7. An SIL can accommodate 150,000 to 300,000 passengers a day compared to 150,000 for the full R7. It is that simple - far more people will benefit with rail.

Further, unlike R7, which will primarily serve those in private cars and taxis, rail will serve a much wider range of the community.

By building rail, a large proportion of the passenger traffic can be diverted thereby freeing up road capacity on Pokfulam Road and Victoria Road. The extent to which people will ride rail rather than use cars or taxis will depend largely on the speed and reliability when comparing

road and rail. Central is already highly congested, so travel time is variable. R7 will add to traffic problem in Central. At peak travelling times, rail is going to be more reliable.

TB's own traffic estimates for R7 show that most of the users will be private cars and taxis. In 2016, 70% of passengers will be in cars and taxis. Only 18% of vehicles using R7 will be goods vehicles. This means that even according to TB's own estimate, R7 is not really needed for moving goods.

5. Transport Department working at cross purposes with Planning Department

The Planning Department has greatly reduced the future populations increase planned for in Southern Hong Kong Island and has designed the area as the "Garden of the Metropolitan Area". This has several important implications.

Firstly, the number of people commuting each day from this area into Central and Kowloon will be less than originally projected, but travel demands will be higher than originally expected during off peak hours as local residents from other parts of Hong Kong (along with tourists) visit this area for recreational purposes. A rail option would serve such visitors far better than a road. Secondly, rail would leave the shoreline along Sandy Bay free for future amenity use. While R7 would forever destroy this potential.

What this comes down to is that if Southern Hong Kong Island is to become a resource for the whole of Hong Kong (as envisioned by the Planning Department), then the loss in environmental and amenity value associated with R7 would be bome by the whole of Hong Kong not just the people living in the area. Added to the financial imprudence of pushing for R7 versus rail (see 2 above) this makes R7 a wrong policy of truly massive proportions.

6. Conclusion

Our research shows that R7 is not the best option to relieve congestion. Existing roads and current improvements provide sufficient capacity for some more years, which allows for time to build a SIL, which will benefit the whole of Hong Kong.

A rail option is in line with the Government's own goals to provide rail-led transport. We wish to quote from TB's own study, the Comprehensive Transport Study CTS3:

> *"... simply building more roads is not a solution as the corresponding increase in traffic will put additional pressure on the environment" and "railway will form the backbone of the future passenger transport network".*

So far this assertion has been only an empty promise (the government propose to spend far more on roads in the coming 15 years than on rail (and indeed to build several times more kilometres of road than rail). Southern Hong Kong Island presents an excellent opportunity for the Government to move beyond rhetoric to action. We urge the Government to begin by conducting a proper comparative evaluation of all possible alternatives including a medium rail system.