

Chapter IX : Transport

9.1 At the invitation of the Chairman, the Secretary for the Environment, Transport and Works (SETW), Dr Sarah LIAO, briefed members on the key areas of work in the policy area of transport for 2003-2004 and explained the relevant provision in the Estimates (Appendix V-8).

Public transport

9.2 Mr LAU Chin-shek enquired about the progress of the on-going studies in relation to the process for adjustment of public transport fares and the merger of the MTR Corporation Limited (MTRCL) and the Kowloon-Canton Railway Corporation (KCRC). He also sought confirmation from the Administration as to whether determination of railway fares would be included in the new fare adjustment process regardless of the outcome of the merger proposal.

9.3 In reply, the Permanent Secretary for the Environment, Transport and Works (Environment) (PSE) confirmed that the new fare adjustment process would cover both railway and franchised bus fares. In the course of study, the Administration had reviewed extensive data and information from public transport operators and analyzed those against the historical trend of inflation/deflation in Hong Kong so as to ascertain their operating environment. Upon completion of the study, the Administration would consult the relevant public transport operators, and arrange to brief the Transport Panel in due course.

9.4 Regarding the proposed merging of MTRCL and KCRC, PSE reported that in the past few months, the Environment, Transport and Works Bureau (ETWB) and the Financial Services and the Treasury Bureau had been studying the pros and cons of the merger proposal, including its impact on the general public, the management and staff of the two corporations, the minority shareholders of MTRCL and other stakeholders, and the blueprint of future railway development. Assuring members that the study would be undertaken as a priority project, PSE said that the Administration would arrange to present the findings and consult members once a decision was made.

9.5 Mr LAU Kong-wah expressed concern about the impact of the Border Facilities Improvement Tax on the fare level of East Rail cross-boundary service. In this regard, he asked if the Administration considered it necessary for KCRC to adjust the fares of its cross-boundary service downwards. SETW replied that any decision on fare adjustments would have to be made by KCRC taking into account all relevant factors including its financial position.

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9.6 Mr SIN Chung-kai sought information about the planning and resource provision for introducing the Harbour Tour Service (HTS). The Commissioner for Transport (C for T) said that HTS would be plying within the Victoria Harbour with calling points at Central, Wanchai, Hung Hom and Tsim Sha Tsui. The operator of HTS was selected through open tender in December 2002 and the service was expected to commence operation in the third quarter in 2003. Given the availability of additional berths at the calling points, the introduction of new HTS would not have any adverse impact on passengers of existing ferry services. Additional expenditure for carrying out minor modification and enhancement works for pier facilities would be absorbed by existing provisions.

Environmental issues relating to bus operation

9.7 Mr Martin LEE stressed the need to ensure the efficient use of roads. He relayed the suggestion from Members of the Democratic Party that bus-bus interchange (BBI) schemes should be implemented in full swing to relieve traffic congestion at the Central Business District while achieving further improvements in air quality. All cross-harbour bus traffic coming from Kowloon and the New Territories via Western Harbour Crossing or Cross Harbour Tunnel/Eastern Harbour Crossing should terminate at Sheung Wan and Causeway Bay respectively. Interchange passengers could then make use of shuttle services run by environmentally-friendly buses for onward journeys to the Central Business District.

9.8 While noting Mr Martin LEE's suggestion, C for T explained that as the buses entering the Central Business District were mostly full in the peak periods, it would not be productive to interchange passengers just for the sake of interchanging. Thus, other means would also have to be considered to complement the BBI schemes in reducing congestion at busy urban corridors. To this end, the Administration had put forward proposals to truncate, cancel, divert or introduce frequency reduction for about 70 bus routes all over the territory for implementation in 2003-2004. Consultation with the relevant District Councils (DCs) would be conducted before such proposals were taken forward. However, past experience had shown that route rationalization proposals would sometimes meet with a mixed response from the local community. In those cases, the Administration would continue discussion with the DCs and try its best to come up with solutions that were acceptable to all parties concerned.

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9.9 In view of the inconvenience so caused, Mr Martin LEE commented that opposition from the local community was understandable. However, it was up to the Administration to convince the travelling public about the time saving and environmental benefits associated with the implementation of bus route rationalization programme. As a first step, he called on the Administration to consider implementing the suggested interchange service during off-peak hours.

9.10 Enquiring about the resource requirement for implementing the 70 route rationalization proposals in 2003-2004, Ms Emily LAU called on the Transport Department (TD) to continue its efforts in taking forward bus route rationalization schemes so as to reduce congestion and air pollution in busy urban corridors, particularly between Central and Causeway Bay. Expressing similar views, Dr TANG Siu-tong sought elaboration on the criteria adopted by the Administration for bus route selection under the proposed rationalization schemes. Referring to the 70 proposals in hand, he said that early consultation could help ensure local support for this important initiative.

9.11 C for T stated that expenditure relating to route rationalization would be absorbed within TD's recurrent provisions for the regulation of bus services. In taking forward rationalization proposals, TD would consider a number of factors including the level of ridership on buses and the availability of an efficient interchange service for passengers to complete their remaining journeys. While acknowledging that there was always room for more rationalization, he stressed that the Administration would need to strike a balance between minimizing inconvenience to passengers on existing routes and improving congestion in busy urban corridors. At the members' request, C for T undertook to provide details of the 70 routes under the rationalization schemes to be implemented in 2003-2004 for members' information after the meeting.

9.12 Ms Emily LAU further enquired about the deployment of environmentally-friendly buses to run on busy urban corridors. C for T explained that as an initiative to reduce the amount of bus emission, the Administration had completed a programme under which franchised bus companies would only deploy Euro-II standard or above buses to run on the busy Yee Wo Street in Causeway Bay. The Administration would continue discussion with franchised bus operators so that more environmentally-friendly buses would be deployed to run on other busy corridors, such as Des Voeux Road Central and Nathan Road, as far as practicable.

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9.13 Expressing concern about the visual impact of trolley bus operation, Ms Emily LAU sought information about the Administration's on-going study on the merits of introducing such a transport system in South East Kowloon Development (SEKD). In reply, C for T briefly recapped the findings of an earlier study undertaken by the Administration on the feasibility of introducing a trolley bus system in Hong Kong. According to the study, there were important financial, operational as well as technical issues associated with trolley bus operation in busy urban areas. However, for new development areas, better planning at the design stage might help address some of the problems identified. In view of the new development in SEKD, the Administration was now studying the comparative merits of introducing trolley bus vis-à-vis other environmentally-friendly transport modes in the area so as to determine the best choice of transport mode. The Transport Panel would be briefed on the findings when available.

Cross-boundary transport and traffic arrangements

9.14 Underlying the importance of making timely provision for transport infrastructure to enhance the link between Hong Kong and the Pearl River Delta Region, Ms Miriam LAU enquired about the resource allocation in 2003-2004 for implementing co-location of clearance facilities at Huanggang. She recalled that it was the Administration's intention to implement co-location of clearance facilities at Huanggang prior to the commissioning of such facilities at the new control point at Shenzhen Western Corridor scheduled for completion in 2005.

9.15 In reply, SETW said that discussions with the Mainland authorities on co-location of immigration and customs facilities at Huanggang were being undertaken by the Security Bureau. Subject to the agreement reached between the Mainland authorities and the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region (HKSAR) Government on the related policy and operational arrangements, ETWB would be responsible for the provision of necessary transport infrastructure. Addressing members' concern about the need to relieve congestion at boundary crossings, SETW reported that good progress had been made in respect of discussions with the Mainland authorities on the construction of an additional vehicular bridge connecting Huanggang and Lok Ma Chau.

9.16 To facilitate choice for the passengers, Mr LAU Kong-wah considered that different modes of public transport should be allowed to operate to the cross boundary control points, in particular Lo Wu. In this respect, he enquired about the resource provision for undertaking relevant initiatives in 2003-2004.

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9.17 SETW responded that it was the Administration's transport policy to permit, where circumstances allowed, different modes of public transport to operate at the cross boundary control points as far as possible. Citing the on-going trial operation of taxis and green minibuses at the Lok Ma Chau Control Point during the extended hours for passenger crossing, SETW stressed that the arrangements for the provision of transport services to control points had to be implemented in a progressive manner, taking into account the conditions and constraints at each of the control points. Moreover, the resource and staffing implications as well as the planning and development in the Mainland would also have to be considered carefully. In view of the site and space constraints at Lo Wu, the Administration had no immediate plans to allow the operation of alternative public transport services there.

9.18 Mr LEUNG Fu-wah noted that the study jointly commissioned by the State Development Planning Commission and the HKSAR Government on "Transport linkage between Hong Kong and Pearl River West" was being undertaken by a Mainland research institute at a cost of \$1.6 million. Given the extensive scope of research required and the expenditure so incurred, he remarked that the study was rather cost-effective. He suggested that the Administration should consider whether research institutes in the Mainland could be given more opportunities to undertake consultancy studies in relation to cross boundary infrastructural projects.

9.19 In response, the Director of Highways (D of Hy) explained that as 90% of the proposed transport link would be located within Pearl River West in the Guangdong Province, a Mainland research institute was engaged for the purpose. For consultancy studies on transport infrastructure to be provided within HKSAR territory, the Administration would adhere to the established tendering procedures.

Traffic management measures

9.20 Mr SIN Chung-kai enquired about the progress of the Transport Information System (TIS) which was developed at a cost of \$63.6 million. In reply, C for T briefly recapped the functions of TIS and its two core components, viz. the Public Transport Information Service (PTIS) and the Intelligent Road Network (IRN). He reported that subsequent to the funding approval from the Finance Committee, a tender exercise was conducted in July 2002. The Administration was now finalizing the tenders for award later in the year. The first phase of PTIS and IRN would be ready for operation in early 2004 while the

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final phase of PTIS would be completed within six months following the commissioning of the first phase. In the meantime, the Administration would also hold discussions with private sector service providers for the development of value-added applications for the public using the basic information and the intelligent road network obtainable from TIS.

9.21 In response to Ms Emily LAU, C for T assured members that TIS would not have any privacy implications as the system only sought to digitize transport and traffic data for access by the public via the Internet.

Street lighting

9.22 Noting the increased financial provision in 2003-2004 for electricity cost of additional street lighting, Mr SIN Chung-kai suggested that better energy-saving technologies should be adopted where possible to achieve cost savings.

9.23 D of Hy explained that currently, street lighting was already controlled by light-sensitive photocell which switched the light on and off according to the amount of light detected. Insofar as the overriding consideration of road safety allowed, the Administration would continue to identify ways to ensure the efficient use of street lighting. As regards street lighting for rural areas, D of Hy said that well-lit roads also served an important function as a guard against crimes. In this respect, the Administration was examining whether remote control device could be used as an acceptable energy-saving solution.

Licensing service

9.24 In view of TD's success in reducing the target average waiting time for driving test candidates from 85 days to 63 days for the past two consecutive years, Ms Miriam LAU considered that TD should aim at providing a more efficient service to the public by making the waiting time of 63 days a pledged target in 2003-2004. For this purpose, the Administration should ensure that an adequate level of staffing support in the Driving Examiner grade was provided. She also asked whether TD had benchmarked Hong Kong's average waiting time for driving tests with other neighbouring countries.

9.25 In response, C for T explained that in the coming year, some Driving Examiners would be diverted to assist on other initiatives for promoting road safety such as the issuance of new private driving instructor's licences and

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the Driver Improvement Scheme. Given this additional demand on staffing resources, the estimate of average waiting time for driving test candidates was more on the conservative side. However, he assured members that the real target TD would strive to achieve in 2003-2004 was still 63 days.

9.26 In terms of the establishment and strength of Driving Examiners, C for T reported that the number of staff had been reduced as no new Driving Examiners were recruited in the past few years to replace those who retired. However, with continuous efforts to achieve efficiency improvements for greater productivity, TD had managed to maintain the standard of licensing service to the public. Nonetheless, TD would review Hong Kong's situation with other neighbouring territories. At Ms Miriam LAU's request, he undertook to provide written information on the changes in the establishment and strength of Driving Examiners for the past three years after the meeting.

Staffing resources

9.27 Noting that in 2002-2003, TD had deleted or re-deployed 20 posts in the lower and middle ranks (i.e. those with starting salary pay at Master Pay Scale (MPS) 44 and below) while there were as many as 17 vacant posts in the upper ranks (i.e. those with starting salary pay at MPS 45 and above), Ms Emily LAU queried why downsizing was only confined to the lower and middle ranks. To achieve greater efficiency and savings in the coming year, she called on the Administration to critically review the continued need of those vacant posts in the upper ranks.

9.28 In response, C for T explained that the difference between the establishment and strength of the upper ranks were generally filled by officers acting up in the posts concerned. These posts were not vacant and they should not be deleted because they were still required functionally. On the other hand, most of the 17 posts deleted or re-deployed in 2002-2003 were result of the first Voluntary Retirement (VR) Scheme where staff in designated VR grades had decided to leave the civil service. As regards the deletion or re-deployment of posts in 2003-2004, he said that a firm conclusion would be drawn up subject to the outcome of the second VR Scheme.

