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URA commences Peel Street/Graham Street project

The Urban Renewal Authority (URA) today (Thursday) announced the commencement of the Peel Street/Graham Street redevelopment project, estimated at a total development cost of \$3.8 billion, by conducting an occupancy survey.

Measuring a total site area of about 57,240 square feet, the project is bounded by Peel Street, Graham Street, Gage Street, Wellington Street, Cochrane Street, Gutzlaff Street, Staveley Street and Kin Sau Lane in the Central and Western district. Some 360 property interests in 37 old buildings are expected to be affected. Four of the blocks were built pre-war, while the remainder were built mostly in the mid-50's and early 60's.

Speaking at today's media briefing to announce details of the occupancy survey, District Development Director of the URA, Mr Joseph Lee, said: "It is estimated that some 470 households involving approximately 1,120 people are residing within the site area. We are deploying some 90 staff members to ascertain the exact number of those affected and the occupancy status of the properties involved, aiming to complete the survey within three days."

Depending on the work progress, the URA intends to issue purchase offers to the owners for acquiring the 360 affected property interests in about three months. Upon completion of the property acquisition exercise, the URA will make compensation or rehousing arrangements for the tenants concerned. The estimated cost of cash compensation and rehousing is about \$1.8 billion.

The Peel Street/Graham Street project is one of the projects announced but not yet commenced by the former Land Development Corporation in 1998. Over the past years, the affected residents have repeatedly petitioned the Legislative Council, the Government, Central & Western District Council and the URA urging for early implementation of the project to improve their living environment.

Also speaking at the briefing, Mr Michael Ma, Director, Planning & Design said: "In moving this project forward, the URA will not only bring tangible benefits to those directly affected, but will also provide a multi-purpose community hall with a floor space of 13,500 square feet and some 17,000 square feet of quality open space for the enjoyment of the community."

Central & Western District is a place full of interesting historical and cultural elements. Over the past two years, the URA has spared no efforts in engaging the community in a bottom-up approach on the design and other aspects of the project. The URA, after giving due consideration to all views expressed, has incorporated a lot of the suggestions in the final plan and design which has recently been approved by the Town Planning Board.

Mr Ma said: "One of the unique design elements is to create Graham Street as Hong Kong's first 'Old Shop Street' where Hong Kong's renowned old specialty shops would be attracted to do businesses there. The entrance of the 'Old Shop Street' will be located at the present Wing Woo Grocery whose façade will be preserved, subject to structural feasibility study. At the other end are the three prewar shop houses at 26A-26C Graham Street which likewise will be preserved and put to adaptive re-use. The

rest are three-storey structures to be built for the specialty old shops; the design of these structures will be based on that of traditional shop houses in Hong Kong."

"The URA is keenly aware that we will be faced with a daunting task. Hence, a heritage advisory panel under the Central and Western District Advisory Committee, comprising district council members, local community figures, conservation experts, as well as hawker and resident representatives, has been set up to advise on our various conservation proposals. The panel and experts have started work and have initially obtained a very positive response from operators or descendents of the once vibrant specialty old shops."

"The project is also unique in that it is one of the earliest open markets in Hong Kong. Hawkers still operate in the area. Although strictly speaking they fall outside the project boundaries, we fully encourage these hawkers to continue with their activities upon completion of the project. Indeed we have been in close touch for months with government departments concerned and hawker representatives; we hope to put in place the best possible mutually-acceptable arrangements, be they interim or permanent," Mr Ma added.

He said: "We will take into consideration the views and needs of hawkers in our design for the future stalls so as to give added emphasis to the original district feature."

Mr Joseph Lee added: "Upon completion of the survey, we will arrange a series of briefings for the affected residents and shop operators to explain to them the acquisition and compensation and rehousing arrangements. Meanwhile, we have appointed the urban renewal social service team of the St James' Settlement to provide professional and practical services alongside our frontline staff for the affected residents, in particular the elderly, physically handicapped, new arrivals and single-parent families. The telephone number of the social service team is 2857 1606.

The URA will also set up a district office at 27A Gage Street to address public enquiries on the project. Members of the public are also welcomed to call the URA hotline at 2588 2333 for general enquiries about the project.

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