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Panel on Food Safety and Environmental Hygiene

Background brief prepared by the Legislative Council Secretariat for the meeting on 14 April 2015

Supply of public niches

Purpose

This paper provides background information on issues relating to the supply of public niches and summarizes the main views and concerns of members of the Panel on Food Safety and Environmental Hygiene ("the Panel") on the subject.

Background

The district-based columbarium development scheme

2. According to the Administration, its columbarium policy was underpinned by a three-pronged strategy which included enhancing the supply of public niches, regulating private columbaria and promoting green burials. To enhance the supply of public niches, the Administration was promoting the district-based columbarium development scheme. It announced 24 potential sites in 18 districts for columbarium development ("the 24 potential sites") in three batches in July and December 2010, and April 2011. The list of the 24 potential sites is in **Appendix I**. The Administration had advised the Panel that whether the 24 potential sites could eventually be used for developing columbarium facilities would depend on the results of various studies (e.g. technical feasibility studies, traffic impact assessments and engineering feasibility studies) as well as the support of District Councils ("DCs").

3. As advised by the Administration at the Panel meeting on 10 March 2015, the progress of the district-based columbarium development scheme

was as follows -

- (a) two projects (i.e. the Diamond Hill Columbarium extension project of Wong Tai Sin DC and the Cheung Chau Cemetery extension project of Island DC) had been completed, providing a total of 2 540 new niches;
- (b) five projects (including Tsang Tsui project of Tuen Mun DC, Tsing Tsuen Road project of Kwai Tsing DC, Wo Hop Shek Cemetery project (Phase 1) of North DC, Cape Collinson Road project of Eastern DC and Sandy Ridge Cemetery project of North DC), which would provide a total of 449 000 new niches, had already obtained support from the respective DCs. For the number of niches to be provided by these projects, please refer to **Appendix II**; and
- (c) the Administration was following up the remaining projects, with the necessary engineering feasibility studies and traffic impact assessments largely completed.

According to the Administration, the two completed projects and the five DC-supported projects would provide a total of 451 540 new niches, accounting for more than half of the total number of niches available in all the 24 projects.

Other measures to increase the supply of niches

4. Apart from the district-based columbarium development scheme, the Food and Environmental Hygiene Department ("FEHD") provided 43 710 new niches at the Wo Hop Shek Columbarium for allocation in three phases between 2012 and 2014. According to the Administration, between 2015 and 2017, the Board of Management of the Chinese Permanent Cemeteries ("BMCPC") and religious bodies were expected to provide about 25 000 and 47 000 new niches respectively.

5. In order to optimize the use of existing public columbaria, FEHD had, with effect from January 2014, relaxed the arrangement of placing additional sets of ashes into public niches, including (a) relaxing the definition of "close relative"; and (b) allowing the public to place more than two sets of ashes in a standard niche and more than four sets in a large niche. To provide similar arrangement at BMCPC's columbaria, the Home Affairs Bureau planned to introduce the relevant amendments to the Chinese Permanent Cemeteries Ordinance (Cap. 1112) and its Rules (Cap. 1112A) to LegCo in 2015-2016. Furthermore, the Administration would explore new

measures such as designating different worship periods for different blocks of niches, limiting access during one or both of the grave sweeping seasons and time-limited occupation of new niches.

Members' concerns

6. Members' main views and concerns on the supply of public niches as expressed at various Panel meetings since 2010 were summarized in the ensuing paragraphs.

The district-based columbarium development scheme

7. Members expressed grave concern about the supply of public niches in Hong Kong and urged the Administration to substantially increase the supply in the light of demographic changes. Members were also concerned whether the Administration could solicit support from all DCs to provide new public columbarium facilities in all the sites. The Administration was urged to provide a concrete implementation timetable for the 24 potential sites.

8. The Administration advised that while it had been adopting all feasible measures to increase the supply of public niches, land of a size suitable for large-scale development of public columbarium facilities was scarce. In taking forward the 24 potential sites for columbarium development, the Administration had to address various technical issues (such as traffic assessments and feasibility studies) and the concerns of neighbouring residents and DCs. As such, it would not be feasible to provide a concrete timetable for all the sites. The Administration would actively explore new measures so as to help reduce both vehicular and pedestrian flows during the grave-sweeping seasons, and bring the traffic impacts to an acceptable level, thereby allowing more niches to be built in new columbarium developments.

Other measures to increase the supply of niches

9. Some members urged the Administration to conduct a trial scheme on new measures which could help address the shortage of niches, such as designating different worship periods for different blocks of niches, limiting access during one or both of the grave sweeping seasons and time-limited occupation of new niches. There was another view that the Administration should enhance the architectural design of columbarium facilities to reduce the adverse visual and psychological impact on the residents in the vicinity of the facilities, thereby facilitating support from the districts.

10. Some members considered that the Administration should seek collaboration with the Guangdong Province in building columbarium facilities there as a measure to increase the supply of niches for Hong Kong residents. The Administration advised that it had in earlier years liaised with the relevant authorities in Guangdong Province on the provision of public niches there for Hong Kong residents and noted that the supply of public cemeteries and niches for local residents in Guangdong Province was also insufficient. While the Administration had an open mind about the above suggestion, priority should be given to enhancing the supply of public niches in Hong Kong.

Allocation arrangement of public niches

11. Members noted that at present, public niches were allocated by computer ballot and the Office of The Ombudsman released in October 2014 an investigation report on FEHD's arrangements in allocating columbarium niches. The Ombudsman urged FEHD to consider allocating niches on a first-come, first-served basis and strive to resolve the problem of long waiting applicants. If the existing method of allocation by ballot was to remain, The Ombudsman recommended FEHD to enhance the allocation arrangements and establish a waitlisting mechanism for speedier allocation of niches in future exercises. Members considered that the Administration should provide temporary ashes storage facilities for applicants waiting for allocation of permanent niches.

Latest development

12. The Administration will brief the Panel on the latest development of the provision of columbarium and garden of remembrance at Tsang Tsui, Tuen Mun at the meeting on 14 April 2015.

Relevant papers

13. A list of the relevant papers on the LegCo website is in **Appendix III**.

Appendix I

The 24 sites identified for public columbarium development

1	Eastern	A site on Cape Collinson Road, opposite the Chai Wan Chinese Permanent Cemetery Columbarium and next to Wan Tsui Estate Park
2	Wong Tai Sin	Diamond Hill columbarium extension
3	Sha Tin	A site on On Hing Lane, Shek Mun, next to Shatin Refuse Transfer Station
4	Sha Tin	Fu Shan columbarium extension
5	North	Surplus coffin burial grounds and other land within the Wo Hop Shek Cemetery
6	North	Undeveloped areas within the Sandy Ridge Cemetery
7	Tuen Mun	Part of the Tsang Tsui ash lagoon next to Black Point Power Station
8	Kwai Tsing	Ex-Kwai Chung Incineration Plant on Kwai Yu Street
9	Kwai Tsing	A site on Kwai Tai Road, southeast of ex-Kwai Chung Incineration Plant
10	Kwai Tsing	A site on Tsing Tsuen Road near the Tsuen Wan Chinese Permanent Cemetery
11	Islands	Cheung Chau Cemetery extension
12	Islands	Mui Wo Lai Chi Yuen extension
13	Central and Western	A site at Mount Davis Road, east of Chiu Yuen Cemetery
14	Wan Chai	FEHD's Hong Kong Cemeteries and Crematoria Office (part thereof) at Wong Nai Chung Road
15	Shum Shui Po	A site north of Ching Cheung Road near the Roman Catholic Cemetery

16	Kwun Tong	A site next to the Ex-Ma Yau Tong Central Landfill Site
17	Yau Tsim Mong	Former school within Tin Hau Temple on Temple Street
18	Southern	A site adjoining the Chinese Christian Cemetery at Pok Fu Lam
19	Kowloon City	A vacant staff quarter (part thereof) inside a funeral parlour at 6 Cheong Hang Road, Hung Hom
20 & 21	Tsuen Wan	Two sites located at the Eastern and Western Ends of Sham Shui Kok Drive, Siu Ho Wan, North Lantau
22	Yuen Long	A site between San Tam Road and Mai Po Lung Road, San Tin
23	Tai Po	A site at the southwestern corner of the Shuen Wan Ex-Landfill, near Tai Po Industrial Estate
24	Sai Kung	A site at Area 132, Tsueng Kwan O, near the Tseung Kwan O Chinese Permanent Cemetery

Source: Annex A to the Administration's paper provided for the Panel meeting on 11 December 2012 [LC Paper No. CB(2)304/12-13(05)].

Appendix II

Public columbarium projects with support from District Councils (to be completed subject to funding approval from Legislative Council)

District	Potential Site	Targeted Completion Date	Number of Niches
Tuen Mun	Part of the Tsang Tsui ash lagoon next to Black Point Power Station	2018	160 000
Kwai Tsing	A site on Tsing Tsuen Road near the Tsuen Wan Chinese Permanent Cemetery	2019	20 000
North	Surplus coffin burial grounds and other land within the Wo Hop Shek Cemetery (Phase 1)	To be confirmed	44 000
Eastern	A site on Cape Collinson Road opposite the Chai Wan Chinese Permanent Cemetery Columbarium and next to Wan Tsui Estate Park	To be confirmed	25 000
North	Undeveloped areas within the Sandy Ridge Cemetery	To be confirmed	200 000

Source: The Administration's paper provided for the Panel meeting on 10 March 2015 [LC Paper No. CB(2)952/14-15(07)].

**Relevant papers on
Supply of public niches**

Committee	Date of meeting	Paper
Panel on Food Safety and Environmental Hygiene	9.2.2010 (Item VI)	Agenda Minutes
	6.7.2010 (Item III)	Agenda Minutes
	20.9.2010 (Item I)	Agenda Minutes
	12.4.2011 (Item IV)	Agenda Minutes
	11.12.2012 (Items IV)	Agenda Minutes
	19.11.2013 (Item I)	Agenda Minutes
	8.7.2014 (Item III)	Agenda Minutes
	10.3.2015 (Item V)	Agenda