

LCQ1: Suggestion on reorganising duties of Development Bureau and Transport and Housing Bureau

Following is a question by the Hon Dennis Kwok and a reply by the Chief Secretary for Administration, Mr Matthew Cheung Kin-chung, in the Legislative Council today (November 14):

Question:

Some members of the public have relayed that policy blunders, ineffective monitoring and perfunctory implementation on the part of the Government in the areas of transport and housing are not uncommon in recent years. For example, road transport was paralyzed on the day after the onslaught of super typhoon Mangkhut in Hong Kong, railway construction works were found to be non-compliant and have caused settlement to the buildings in the vicinity, housing and land supply were in severe shortage making it difficult for members of the public to purchase homes and the waiting time for public rental housing hitting record high time and again. Such members of the public consider that it is difficult for the Transport and Housing Bureau to handle the two major policy areas of transport and housing, and that it is unreasonable for the two closely related policy areas of housing and land to be under the charge of two bureaux. In this connection, will the Government inform this Council whether it will consider afresh reorganising the duties of the Development Bureau and the Transport and Housing Bureau?

Reply:

President,

The Hong Kong Special Administrative Region (HKSAR) Government keeps an open mind in principle towards the reorganisation of Government structure. Over the years, in view of socio-economic changes, the Government underwent reorganisation from time to time to better support the policy objectives of the Chief Executive and enhance overall operational efficiency.

In fact, within more than one year after the current-term Government has taken office, we have already completed two organisational changes in the Government by transferring the Efficiency Unit to the Information and Technology Bureau and the Legal Aid Department to the Chief Secretary for Administration's Office. In her Policy Address announced last month, the Chief Executive notes that there have been a considerable amount of views suggesting that the Transport and Housing Bureau (THB) is overburdened and should be split into two, with the establishment of a new policy bureau to co-ordinate housing and land policies. The Chief Executive generally agrees that there is such a need and will further consider how to implement the suggestion.

In recent years, some members of the public have put forward various suggestions on the respective roles and co-operation between the THB and the Development Bureau (DEVB) with the intention of enabling the Government to focus and consolidate its resources on taking forward various policies and initiatives relating to transport, land and housing. The Government recognises that the division of responsibilities between the two policy bureaux may have attracted attention owing to public concerns on the aforesaid subjects. In this regard, ever since the current-term Government assumed office, the Government has adopted an innovative mindset in coming up with various concrete, feasible and practicable initiatives that seek to make Hong Kong a more well-connected and liveable city.

For example, in the Policy Address announced last month, the Government has proposed exempting the tolls charged on or paying the tolls for franchised buses for using government and franchised tunnels and roads. Coupled with the non-means-tested Public Transport Fare Subsidy Scheme to be implemented from January 1, 2019, the fare burden of commuters can be relieved. We have also put forward a toll adjustment proposal for the rationalisation of traffic among the three road harbour crossings, with a view to addressing cross-harbour traffic congestion that has bothered our community for a long time. The THB had also worked very hard to take forward the smooth commissioning of the Hong Kong Section of the Guangzhou-Shenzhen-Hong Kong Express Rail Link as well as the Hong Kong-Zhuhai-Macao Bridge. These two iconic cross-boundary infrastructures were commissioned in September and October respectively, marking a new era for Hong Kong.

The housing problem always tops the priorities of the current-term Government. We endeavour to enrich the housing ladder and provide adequate and affordable housing to families in different income brackets to enable them to have comfortable homes and improve their living environment. The Government announced the revision of the pricing mechanism for the Home Ownership Scheme (HOS) flats in June this year. The new mechanism revises the test for assessing affordability, so that the selling prices of HOS flats are no longer linked to the market prices of private flats and ensuring that at least 75 per cent of flats in every sale exercise are affordable to families with income at the median monthly household income of non-owner occupier households. The community is generally positive on this initiative. Balloting for the first batch of the HOS flats under the new pricing mechanism will be conducted this month and flat selection will commence in February next year. Regarding the affordable "Starter Homes" for Hong Kong middle-class families, the pre-sale of the first project located at Ma Tau Wai Road will be launched next month. It is evident that we are proactively responding to community aspirations, with some of these new measures and initiatives already put into practice and the rest expected to be rolled out gradually.

With an aim of providing steady and sufficient land resources to meet various development needs of Hong Kong, the DEVB has been adopting a multi-pronged land supply strategy. Increasing land supply for housing is amongst the DEVB's priorities. In recent years, the DEVB endeavours to rezone some 210 sites with potential for housing development. It has also been taking forward various New Development Area and New Town Extension projects at full

steam, including conducting studies, statutory planning work, seeking funding for the projects, enhancing the compensation and rehousing arrangements, etc. In order to forge a greater consensus on land supply options in society, the Chief Executive appointed the Task Force on Land Supply last September to facilitate collaborative deliberation with the public through a very extensive public engagement exercise. This year's Policy Address has also put forward a number of ideas on increasing land supply. The DEVB will continue its efforts on increasing land supply in a bid to break the current stalemate on land shortage and provide sufficient land to meet the needs of housing, community facilities and economic development.

I would like to respond to two points made in the Hon Dennis Kwok's question.

First, the HKSAR Government has all along been working as a team and, with such concerted efforts, it strives to take forward its work in various policy areas in an efficient and effective manner. In addition to the regular co-ordination and collaborative mechanisms at different levels within the Government, there are also well-established communication platforms among bureaux/departments. The Government operates as a whole regardless of the organisational structure and division of responsibilities among policy bureaux. Relevant bureaux/departments shall continue to work together on specific issues through inter-departmental platforms where necessary.

Second, in the course of public administration, it is inevitable that we encounter unexpected challenges and difficulties. In dealing with these severe situations, the Government has been responding in a swift and decisive manner. Serious follow-up actions have also been taken against any situations involving suspected irregularities. The organisation and division of responsibilities among policy bureaux do not affect the usual steadfastness and resolve of the Government in handling various problems. We will continue to listen carefully and humbly to public comments and criticisms on the performance of the Government. Nonetheless, we do not consider it necessary to suggest any causal relationship between individual controversies and proposals for the reorganisation of policy bureaux.

The Government will continue to listen to voices from all sectors and further consider implementing the suggestion of reorganising policy bureaux in a timely manner.