

LCQ11: Railway services in Northwest New Territories

Following is a question by the Hon Frankie Yick and a written reply by the Acting Secretary for Transport and Housing, Dr Raymond So Wai-man, in the Legislative Council today (May 16):

Question:

Some residents in Northwest New Territories (NWNT) have relayed that with the rolling out of the Hung Shui Kiu New Development Area and Yuen Long South development projects by the Government, the population in NWNT will increase substantially in the coming decade, generating additional demand for railway services both within and outside the district. They have pointed out that NWNT residents currently have to take rather indirect routes for travelling to Hong Kong Island by railway. For example, they have to take the West Rail Line trains first, followed by a several-minute walk before interchanging for trains of the Tsuen Wan Line or Tung Chung Line, and the passenger throughputs of such railway lines have already reached the maximum capacities during peak hours. Moreover, as the East Rail Line and the Kwun Tong Line are very crowded during peak hours, the Northern Link, which is under planning, will bring little convenience to NWNT residents travelling to the Hong Kong Island by railway. In this connection, will the Government inform this Council:

(1) given that it takes some 10 to 20 years to construct a new railway from feasibility study, inception to the commissioning of the railway, whether the Government will expeditiously embark on a study on the construction of a new railway which provides a direct link between NWNT and Hong Kong Island; if so, of the details; if not, the reasons for that; and

(2) whether it will consider afresh the proposal to construct a Coastal Railway between Tuen Mun and Tsuen Wan, with a view to relieving the loading of the West Rail Line; if so, of the timetable and other details; if not, the reasons for that, and other measures to be put in place to cope with the additional demand for railway services arising from the development in NWNT?

Reply:

President,

My reply to the Hon Frankie Yick's question is as follows:

(1) At present, residents of the Northwest New Territories (NWNT) use the West Rail Line (WRL) to travel to the urban areas. The WRL originally operated with 7-car trains. In 2015, the hourly frequency at each direction was about 20 during the morning peak hours of weekdays, i.e. the headway was about three minutes. Under the Shatin to Central Link (SCL) project, the MTR

Corporation Limited (MTRCL) has increased the number of train cars of WRL from seven to eight since 2016, through the purchase of 148 new train cars and modifications of existing trains. Comparing with 2015, the carrying capacity of WRL is expected to increase by at least 14 per cent when it is fully operated with 8-car trains in the second half of 2018. After the commissioning of the "Tai Wai to Hung Hom Section" of SCL in mid-2019, the WRL will be operated with 8-car trains and provide train services with maximum hourly frequency of 24 at each direction. When comparing with 2015, there is an increase in carrying capacity of about 37 per cent. Subject to the actual patronage, the WRL can further increase its carrying capacity by increasing its fleet size after mid-2019. We expect that the ultimate carrying capacity of WRL will be provided by train services of 8-car trains with an hourly frequency of 28 at each direction. On this basis, the carrying capacity of WRL will increase by 60 per cent when comparing with that in 2015. In this regard, the MTRCL will strengthen the services of the WRL by increasing the train frequency.

After the completion of "Hung Hom to Admiralty Section" of SCL in 2021, the passengers from NWNT to Hong Kong Island can interchange for Tung Chung Line at Nam Cheong Station, or choose to interchange for SCL at Hung Hom Station in order to reach Exhibition Centre and Admiralty. The interchange arrangement for SCL at Hung Hom Station will be more convenient when comparing with the interchange for Tung Chung Line at Nam Cheong Station followed by interchange for Island Line at Hong Kong Station.

The Government is planning to take forward the "Strategic Studies on Railways and Major Roads beyond 2030" (RMR2030+ Studies). The RMR2030+ Studies would examine holistically, based on the latest planning data in Hong Kong, the transport demand of the whole territory from 2031 to 2041 (or later). In particular, the RMR2030+ Studies would take into account the recommendations of the planning study "Hong Kong 2030+: Towards a Planning Vision and Strategy Transcending 2030" being conducted by the Development Bureau and the Planning Department, including the transport demand of the two strategic growth areas (i.e. New Territories North and East Lantau Metropolis), for planning the necessary strategic transport infrastructure network (including railways and major roads). The RMR2030+ Studies would also explore whether it is necessary to construct a new heavy rail for connecting NWNT and the urban areas.

(2) The Transport and Housing Bureau announced the Railway Development Strategy 2014 (RDS-2014) in September 2014. Having regard to transport demand, cost-effectiveness and the development needs of New Development Areas, the RDS-2014 recommends that seven new railway projects be completed in the planning horizon up to 2031.

The RDS-2014 sets out the blueprint for territory-wide railway development based on the findings and final recommendations of the consultancy study. Apart from giving due consideration to the views collected during the public engagement exercises in 2012 and 2013, it takes into account a wide range of factors, including transport demand, land use planning, local development needs, as well as the economic and financial

returns, social benefits, environmental impact and engineering feasibility of the railway projects.

Our consultant at that time evaluated in detail the feasibility of constructing a railway along the coastline between Tuen Mun and Tsuen Wan. According to the consultant's analysis, the local population is mainly concentrated at the eastern and western ends of the coastline between Tuen Mun and Tsuen Wan; while the development density of the remaining areas is relatively low and no basis for new source of passengers is anticipated. Meanwhile, due to the technical difficulties involved, solely the construction cost of a railway along the coastline between Tuen Mun and Tsuen Wan is expected to be very high. The cost-effectiveness can hardly be established up to this point.

Furthermore, after the completion of the improvement works for Tuen Mun Road in 2014, the road network between Tuen Mun and the urban areas has been further improved. This helps shorten the journey time for the bus services between Tuen Mun and the urban areas. Insofar as time savings are concerned, more passengers may prefer to travel to and from Tuen Mun by buses, making the railway scheme relatively less attractive. Besides, implementation of this scheme will create negative visual and landscape impacts along the scenic coastal areas. In longer term, we would consider revisiting the railway proposal if there are further changes in the planning circumstances and population as well as an increase in transport demand in the coastal areas between Tuen Mun and Tsuen Wan, or other relevant new considerations in the planning for development in the region.