

LCQ13: Village Expansion Areas scheme

Following is a question by the Hon Kenneth Lau and a written reply by the Secretary for Development, Mr Michael Wong, in the Legislative Council today (November 14):

Question:

According to the Small House Policy, a New Territories male indigenous villager over 18 years old is entitled to one concessionary grant during his lifetime to build one small house. To cater for the housing needs of the indigenous villagers who do not own any land, the Government introduced a Village Expansion Area (VEA) scheme in 1981. Under the scheme, the Government will form suitable sites on the government lands and resumed private lands within a VEA, and eligible indigenous villagers may apply for private treaty grants of the lands there to build small houses. However, the Government has frozen the scheme since 1999, pending a review of the Small House Policy. Some indigenous villagers have relayed that among the 10 VEAs currently frozen, land resumption procedure has yet to be initiated for eight of them, rendering the indigenous villagers unable to apply for building small houses even though they hold the private lands there; and land resumption has been completed for the remaining two VEAs (namely Pai Tau and Sheung Wo Che VEA and Ha Mei San Tsuen VEA), but there has been no progress for twenty years. In this connection, will the Government inform this Council:

- (1) whether it will consider unfreezing the private lands of the eight aforesaid VEAs in respect of which land resumption has yet to be initiated, and allow indigenous villagers to apply for building small houses on the private lands they hold; if so, of the details; if not, the reasons for that;
- (2) when it will submit funding applications to the Finance Committee of this Council to take forward the scheme in the two aforesaid VEAs in respect of which land resumption has been completed; and
- (3) whether it will study suitably increasing the development intensity of the sites for small houses (e.g. constructing multi-storey "small buildings") so as to achieve more efficient use of the limited land resources; if so, of the details; if not, the reasons for that?

Reply:

President,

The Village Expansion Area (VEA) Scheme was implemented in 1981. Under the VEA Scheme, through resuming private land within the proposed VEAs, assembling government land and thereafter conducting site formation and other relevant public works, the Government allows indigenous villagers to apply for building small houses within the VEAs. The VEA Scheme aimed at providing for better planning of village developments.

In February 1999, in view of the review of the Small House Policy, the Government decided to suspend the implementation of VEA projects for which the related public works had not commenced at that time. In 2002, the Government explained to the Legislative Council (LegCo) that no new VEA projects should be initiated before completion of the Small House Policy review. As for VEA projects which were at an advanced stage of planning, the Government also stated to the LegCo at that time that the individual merits of those cases would be considered to see if there was any scope to implement them before completion of the Small House Policy review.

In the course of the Small House Policy review, complicated issues in aspects such as legal, environment, housing, land use planning and demand on land are inevitably involved, all of which require careful examination. Currently, the Small House Policy review is still ongoing. Nevertheless, as the Development Bureau has to accord priorities to other more pressing policy issues under its purview, we have stated on various occasions that the review of the Small House Policy is not our priority task for the time being.

Since the introduction of the VEA Scheme, the Government has completed works for 36 VEAs. Amongst the remaining 10 frozen VEA projects, the Government has completed land resumption for two of them (i.e. VEA projects in Pai Tau and Sheung Wo Che, Sha Tin and Ha Mei San Tsuen, Yuen Long), while land resumption has not yet commenced for the other eight projects (i.e. VEA projects in Siu Lek Yuen, Sha Tin; Wo Liu Hang, Sha Tin; Sheung/Ha Keng Hau and Hin Tin, Sha Tin; Yuen Long Kau Hui; Ling Hill, North District; Ng Uk Tsuen, North District; Mang Kung Uk, Sai Kung; and Chuen Lung, Tsuen Wan).

My reply to various parts of the question is as follows:

(1) With regard to the aforementioned eight VEA projects with land not yet resumed, during the past few years in which the implementation of those projects was suspended, the Government stated that any applications for building small houses on private land owned by indigenous villager landowners within the boundary of those VEAs would not be processed. In recent years, Heung Yee Kuk (HYK) expressed for a number of times that these indigenous villager landowners were concerned about their land being frozen for years. The HYK has hoped that the concerned land can be "unfrozen" as early as possible, and has suggested that the "unfreezing" proposal can be implemented in some proposed VEAs first, so that indigenous villagers can apply for building small houses on their own private land.

Taking into consideration that the Small House Policy review takes time and that the HYK's proposal involves only private land located within the "Village Type Development" zone, where small house applications are still possible even when there are no VEA projects, the Government is willing to consider the partial "unfreezing" proposal on the prerequisite that any developments on the private land of individual proposed VEAs must be in compliance with the existing policy frameworks in planning, land administration, etc. Furthermore, given the release of private land for individual developments, the HYK and the concerned recognised villages have to accept that the originally planned VEA projects will no longer be applicable.

Based on the above direction, the Lands Department is prepared to resume receiving and processing small house applications on private land within the proposed VEAs in Mang Kung Uk, Sai Kung and Siu Lek Yuen, Sha Tin in accordance with the applicable procedures from January 2019 onwards. As for the other six VEA projects for which land resumption has not yet commenced, we will continue to liaise with HYK on the way forward.

(2) With regard to the two VEA projects for which land resumption has been completed (i.e. VEA projects in Pai Tau and Sheung Wo Che, Sha Tin and Ha Mei San Tsuen, Yuen Long), the Government will seek funding for the relevant works from the Finance Committee of LegCo at an appropriate juncture upon considering the overall arrangements in public works.

(3) The possibility of building multi-storey small houses on sites in the "Village Type Development" zone is discussed in society from time to time. We note that any suggestion of this kind will inevitably involve a number of complicated issues, including compatibility with the intent of the Small House Policy, planning control, provision of infrastructures, environmental impact, as well as legal and public interest considerations. In examining such suggestion, those issues must be holistically considered.