

LCQ5: Proposed North Island Line

Following is a question by the Hon Edward Leung and a reply by the Secretary for Transport and Housing, Mr Frank Chan Fan, in the Legislative Council today (April 6):

Question:

In the Railway Development Strategy 2014, the Government put forward the construction of the North Island Line (NIL) to connect the MTR Tung Chung Line and Tseung Kwan O Line, with a view to diverting the harbour-crossing passenger traffic, alleviating the loading of the MTR Island Line and improving the east-west connectivity of Hong Kong Island. However, after a lapse of seven years, the Government has not yet drawn up a works schedule for the NIL. In addition, it has been reported that at the end of last year, the Government significantly revised the designed alignment of the NIL. In this connection, will the Government inform this Council:

(1) of the latest designed alignment of the NIL (including whether the Tamar Station and the Causeway Bay North Station will be retained), and the expected time when the Government will announce the works schedule;

(2) given that the MTR Tuen Ma Line was fully commissioned last year, while the MTR East Rail Line cross-harbour extension is expected to be commissioned in the middle of this year, whether it has assessed if the commissioning of these railway lines will exacerbate the passenger loading of the Island Line, thereby making the construction of the NIL for diverting passenger flow a more pressing need; and

(3) of the measures in place to expedite the NIL project; the solution in place prior to the commissioning of the NIL for alleviating the problem of the Island Line's passenger throughput reaching its maximum capacity?

Reply:

President,

(1) Railway projects involve huge capital investment, and the Government has to plan in a prudent manner. As clearly stated in the Railway Development Strategy 2014 (RDS-2014), "the taking forward of individual proposed railway projects set out in this Strategy will be subject to the outcome of detailed engineering, environmental and financial studies relating to each project, as well as updated demand assessment and availability of resources...the Government will carefully consider all relevant factors and strike a reasonable balance among various interests of the community when mapping out the way forward for each railway project. In particular, we will critically examine the financial implications of each individual railway project to the Government and consider the most appropriate implementation programme and financing arrangements for each project...Prior to the finalisation of any new railway schemes, there will be further public consultation. Against the above

background, the feasibility and viability of, as well as the indicative timetable for, implementing the recommended projects may vary with changes in circumstances subsequent to the release of the RDS-2014."

The planning of the proposed North Island Line under the RDS-2014 involves complicated technical issues, including the co-ordination of the railway alignment with the planning of the new Harbourfront on the Northern shore of Hong Kong Island, the works which would pass underneath the town centre and be in close proximity to existing buildings and infrastructures (including the Central-Wan Chai Bypass and existing railway tunnel), the diversion of underground utilities along the railway alignment during the construction. Hence, the usable works area is limited and the construction becomes more difficult. Various technical challenges require detailed studies to develop appropriate solutions. Having taken into consideration our comments, the MTR Corporation Limited (MTRCL) is conducting a further study on the feasible options to improve the design of the project. When the details of a proposed railway scheme such as the alignment, location of station(s) and implementation timetable are available, the Government will announce the way forward of the project in due course.

(2) and (3) As for train capacity, the Government and the MTRCL have been closely monitoring the services of various railway lines, as well as the impact of commissioning of new railway lines on passengers' travel patterns. The Tuen Ma Line (TML) was fully commissioned on June 27 last year, connecting the east and west New Territories, providing passengers with more interchanging choices. With the full line commissioning of the TML, about 30 per cent of the East Rail Line (ERL) southbound passengers switched to the TML for destinations in East Kowloon. This has brought significant diversion effect on the ERL southbound trains. However, as the TML serves areas in the east and west New Territories, as well as the Kowloon areas, no impact to the patronage of the Island Line (ISL) was observed since the TML commissioning.

In the months within 2021 when the pandemic was relatively eased, the patronage of the busiest hour in the morning per direction for the critical link on the ISL (Tin Hau to Causeway Bay) was 47 800, and the loading was about 84 per cent (in terms of the service standard of four persons (standing) per square metre). With the anticipated commissioning of the ERL cross-harbour extension in mid-2022, ERL passengers may travel to Hong Kong Island directly, while passengers in the Hong Kong Island could interchange for the ERL for destinations in Kowloon and the New Territories. This would enhance the connectivity of the railway network and provide passengers with more convenient route choices. The ERL cross-harbour extension would not only facilitate the diversion of harbour-crossing railway passengers, but also enhance the overall carrying capacity and connectivity of the railway network. It is expected that commuters' travel patterns will change and ISL's patronage will increase. Yet, based on the MTRCL's assessment, the ISL services would still be adequate to cope with the increase in patronage.

Nevertheless, the MTRCL will continue to closely monitor the changes in passengers' travel patterns, and make timely adjustments to train services based on patronage and the actual situation. It will arrange short-haul trips running between busy stations (such as from North Point to Kennedy Town

during the morning peak, and from Admiralty to Chai Wan during the evening peak) based on actual demand, and ease passenger flow by adjusting train services flexibly. In the meantime, the MTRCL will also step up crowd control measures as needed, so as to improve passenger flow and enhance passengers' travelling experience.

Thank you, President.