

LCQ7: Implementing planning principles for development of Northern Metropolis

Following is a question by the Hon Jeffrey Lam and a written reply by the Secretary for Development, Ms Bernadette Linn, in the Legislative Council today (July 12):

Question:

The Government has adopted six planning principles under the Northern Metropolis Development Strategy, which include "Urban-Rural Integration" and "Proactive Conservation". In this connection, will the Government inform this Council:

(1) given that a substantial amount of land is required for the development of the Northern Metropolis, and controversies arose in society in the past over issues relating to the development of country parks and their periphery, how the Government ensures that there will be sufficient land for the development of the Northern Metropolis and that the land will be put to good use; of the solutions to resolve disputes involving rural land, Tso/Tong land, private fish ponds and wetlands in the New Territories in the course of development, and how it will resolve the problems with villagers and the landowners concerned, so as to achieve "Urban-Rural Integration";

(2) as it is learnt that wild animals such as leopard cats, bats and owls have been found in the New Territories North, while endangered species such as black-faced spoonbills and yellow-breasted buntings have appeared in some of the wetlands, of the measures to be put in place by the Government to achieve a balance between development and conservation and to protect the natural ecology and the habitats of wild animals when developing the Northern Metropolis and undertaking the relevant works projects, so as to reduce the impact on wild animals and natural ecology; and

(3) given that the Government will engage consultancy firms to conduct environmental assessments and studies on design and construction when implementing major works projects, how the Government ensures the delivery of professional services by the consultancy firms engaged and the proper use of public money in the development of the Northern Metropolis?

Reply:

President,

The Northern Metropolis covers the Yuen Long and the North districts, encompassing the mature new towns in Yuen Long, Tin Shui Wai and Fanling/Sheung Shui, various New Development Areas (NDAs) at different planning and development stages, as well as neighbouring rural areas. In consultation with the Environment and Ecology Bureau, the reply to the various parts of the question raised by the Hon Lam is as follows:

(1) The Northern Metropolis will develop more than 3 000 hectares of new development land by phases over the next 20 years, and it is estimated that about half of them is private land. On optimising land use, the 2022 Policy Address proposed that higher plot ratios be adopted for the Northern Metropolis. As a guideline, the maximum plot ratio for residential sites would be 6.5, while that for commercial sites would be 9.5.

In developing the Northern Metropolis, we will give due consideration to the historic and rural features and seek to create a metropolitan environment marked with "Urban-Rural Integration and Co-existence of Development and Conservation". In fact, pursuing development in the Northern Metropolis does not mean changing all existing uses. We will only resume and clear land on a need basis. When the Government resumes land, compensation will be provided according to the policy. The Government will also strive to resolve disputes by strengthening communication with stakeholders and providing timely information.

In respect of the statutory land resumption procedures, if the Development (Town Planning, Lands and Works) (Miscellaneous Amendments) Bill 2022 can be passed by the Legislative Council shortly and comes into effect on September 1, the Lands Resumption Ordinance (Cap. 124) will establish a formal channel for affected owners and occupiers to express their views on land resumption, advance the consultation on land resumption to be conducted at a similar time with the statutory town planning procedures, and specify that upon authorisation of land resumption by the Chief Executive in Council, the Government may commence land resumption and payment of compensation without the need to wait for approval of funding for the relevant works projects. These measures will help reduce the disputes arising from land clearance work by the Government. Besides, the Lands Department and relevant departments will continue to maintain close communication with the affected persons and look after their needs through the community liaison service teams and home visits, etc.

In respect of compensation, the Government has put in place an ex-gratia compensation system for land in the New Territories as an administrative alternative to statutory compensation. In mid-2022, the Development Bureau (DEVB) enhanced the ex-gratia compensation system for land by merging the four compensation zones into two zones, namely "development uses" and "non-development uses" (the latter is mainly for rural improvement and conservation uses) to reflect the nature of land resumption projects in a more appropriate and more concise manner. After merging, the compensation for both public housing projects and NDA projects will be calculated based on the compensation rate for the higher zone, i.e. the compensation rate for "development uses", so as to address land owners' previous concern of using a lower compensation zone for calculating the compensation for public housing projects. Moreover, the compensation for "non-development uses" has also been increased as compared with the Zone C rate normally receivable for rural improvement works in the past.

When resuming Tso/Tong lands for development in the past, one of the difficulties was that compensation may not be able to be disbursed due to reasons unique to Tso/Tong (e.g. vacancies of Tso/Tong managers, or

objections from Tso/Tong members for the managers to receive compensation on their behalf). In view that the management of Tso/Tong in the New Territories is currently under review, the DEVB has put forward proposals to the Heung Yee Kuk (HYK) through the Working Group on Review of Tso/Tong Administration to explore feasible options for streamlining disbursement mechanism for compensation arising from land resumption, and will continue to liaise with the HYK accordingly.

As for land users, it is the Government's established policy to provide rehousing arrangements for eligible households and ex-gratia allowances for eligible households, business operators and farmers etc. We have also enhanced these arrangements in recent years. For instance, the DEVB introduced the non-means-tested rehousing arrangement for households affected by development clearances in mid-2018 (as an alternative to the established means-tested rehousing arrangement) so that eligible households can be rehoused at the dedicated rehousing estates developed and operated by the Hong Kong Housing Society. As a result, land resumption and clearance work has become smoother than before. In addition, the DEVB together with the Agriculture, Fisheries and Conservation Department (AFCD) are reviewing the ex-gratia allowances applicable to livestock farmers to ensure that the allowances reflect the current situation and are effective in assisting those affected farmers.

In taking forward NDA projects, we will consider providing land owners with opportunities to participate in the developments without compromising the planning led by the Government. This would leverage market forces to enhance quantity and speed without the need of land resumption by the Government. One example is the in-situ land exchange scheme at Kwu Tung North/Fanling North and Hung Shui Kiu/Ha Tsuen NDAs, under which the Government allows in-situ land exchange from lot owners to carry out developments which accord with Government's planning intention. In addition, we will engage the rural representatives in considering how the villages to be retained could complement the new developments, so as to enrich the diversity and characteristics of the developments.

(2) While taking forward the development of the Northern Metropolis, the Government is committed to protecting the natural ecology, with a view to striking a balance between conservation and development. The relevant development projects will also have to comply with the relevant requirements on Environmental Impact Assessment.

In addition, the 2022 Policy Address proposed that a "New Proactive Conservation Policy" be implemented through the Government's active conservation of wetlands and fish ponds with ecological value and the development of a Wetland Conservation Parks (WCPs) System, with a view to increasing the environmental capacity for the development of the Northern Metropolis. The AFCD is conducting a strategic feasibility study on the WCPs System to determine the exact locations, areas and mode of management, etc, of the various parks proposed to be established, and targets to complete the relevant study by the end of this year the earliest. Separately, the Government has initiated the statutory procedures for designating about 500 ha of land in Robin's Nest as a country park in 2024, which will echo with

the Shenzhen Wutong Mountain Scenic Area, creating a cross boundary ecological corridor between Hong Kong and Shenzhen.

(3) For large public works projects, investigation and design studies normally involve multi-faceted and complex tasks, including land use planning, engineering designs, surveys, technical assessments, seeking approvals pursuant to statutory procedures. All these tasks demand collaborative input from professional and technical staff of many different disciplines. Works departments would prudently examine whether they have sufficient and suitable in-house manpower resources to cope with the project investigation requirements, so as to determine the need to employ consultants.

During consultant selection exercises, our departments would thoroughly evaluate the tenders to ensure that the consultants' fees are reasonable and cost-effective, and sufficient manpower resources will be deployed to undertake the related work.

Also, the Government has fully established mechanisms in place for monitoring the delivery of consultancy agreements. The project management departments will work with other relevant departments to carefully examine the reports and recommendations put forth by the consultants to ensure that they are in compliance with the requirements of the consultancy agreements. The performance of the consultants is also a basis for future consultant selection by the departments.