

Harbour-front Enhancement Committee

Proposed Domestic Heliport Development

Purpose

This paper briefs Members on the Government's proposal to develop a permanent domestic heliport at a waterfront site in Sheung Wan.

Background

Domestic Helicopter Services

2. Domestic helicopter services comprise mainly local sightseeing flights, business charters, and special-purpose flights for airlifting, aerial surveying and photography. Such services have recorded substantial growth in recent years. Between 2001 and 2003, the number of annual domestic flights increased by 126% from 4,790 movements to 10,831 movements. The growth was mainly driven by the demand for sightseeing flights and business charters, which took up about 80% of the total domestic helicopter movements in 2003. Although sightseeing is a relatively new tourism product, it has gained popularity among tourists and local residents. The prospect of domestic helicopter services is therefore promising, particularly when complemented by the completion of major tourism facilities in the coming years which will attract more tourists to Hong Kong and, hence, generate greater demand for sightseeing helicopter tours. There is also an important potential market for speedy and convenient transportation for time-sensitive business travellers between the central business district (CBD) and other parts of Hong Kong e.g. the Hong Kong International Airport. The domestic helicopter services market is estimated to grow by an average of 6.3% per year between now and 2020.

Need for a Permanent Domestic Heliport

3. In 2001, Government commissioned a Consultancy Study on Helicopter Traffic Demand and Heliport Development in Hong Kong to recommend a strategy to facilitate development of the helicopter services industry. The study recommends, amongst others, that a permanent surface-level heliport be developed in the urban area for commercial domestic helicopter services to meet the expected growth in traffic demand. The Legislative Council Panel on Economic Services (ES Panel) was briefed on the findings of the consultancy in June 2003. ES Panel Members urged the Administration to expedite action to provide for such a facility.

4. Since the closure of the Central Heliport in Admiralty in 2003, there is no permanent heliport for commercial services in the urban area. Helicopter operators currently operate from a temporary facility at the West Kowloon Reclamation, which will eventually have to be closed down to make way for the development of the West Kowloon Cultural District. For the future development of commercial helicopter services, there is an urgent need to put in place a permanent domestic heliport.

Considerations in Site Selection

5. Since 1998, we have conducted repeated rounds of site searches to identify a suitable site for a domestic heliport which has to meet a number of stringent requirements. First, it must be centrally located, easily accessible, as well as in close proximity to the CBD, major hotels and conference facilities. The central location is to provide easy access to tourists and businessmen and support efficient and seamless air connection between CBD, the Hong Kong International Airport and other parts of Hong Kong. Secondly, the site must be located at the waterfront with unobstructed flight path. This is necessary to fulfill the safety requirements imposed by the International Civil Aviation Organisation on single-engine helicopters – the helicopter type most commonly used for domestic services. Thirdly, the site must fulfill all the necessary environmental requirements such that its uses would not conflict with neighbouring land uses.

The Proposed Domestic Heliport

The Site in Sheung Wan

6. After a comprehensive site-search exercise conducted on both sides of the Harbour, only one site in Sheung Wan fulfils all our requirements. The proposed site lies along the waterfront in front of the Western Park Sports Centre (WPSC). A plan showing the location and the layout of the site is at Annex.

Annex

7. The site measures 7,400m². To minimize occupation of valuable waterfront space, only the most basic facilities are proposed for the heliport. They include two landing/take-off pads and two parking pads, together with the necessary supporting facilities such as a passenger lounge, flight operations room, back-office, underground re-fuelling facilities and car-parks. The heliport will take up 4,400 m² initially. In view of the difficulties in identifying a suitable waterfront site for heliport development, the rest of the site area of about 3,000m² will be reserved for future expansion to cater for further growth in traffic demand in the longer term.

8. When the initial phase is completed, the heliport will be able to handle up to 43,000 movements per year, or on average 118 daily movements. The capacity is roughly four times that of the existing domestic operation and will be able to meet our demand beyond 2020 based on current projection.

Technical Assessment

9. We have commissioned a consultancy study on the project which has confirmed the technical feasibility of the site. To minimize adverse noise impact on neighbouring land uses, the heliport layout is designed to take advantage of the WPSC as a natural noise barrier. The Consultant further recommends that a noise barrier be built adjacent to the Sports Centre building to further mitigate the noise impact. The need for additional mitigation measures to minimize noise impact and possible measures to improve the landscape and visual impact of the heliport would be further examined in the environmental impact assessment (EIA) study.

Views of Helicopter Operators

10. However, operators of domestic helicopter services prefer the site planned for a reprovisioning heliport for the Government Flying Service (GFS) at the north-eastern corner of the Hong Kong Convention and Exhibition Centre in Wan Chai. They suggest opening the future GFS heliport to commercial operations. The Government does not support this proposal. First, when the reprovisioning heliport was discussed at the LegCo Panel on Planning, Lands and Works (PLW Panel) between 1999 and 2001 in the context of the Wan Chai Development Phase II project, Members had raised concerns about the adverse noise impact of helicopter operation and its incompatibility with the tourism focus of the surrounding land uses. Members also stressed that reclamation should only be carried out where it is absolutely necessary. To address their concerns, Government committed that the heliport would only be used by the GFS for emergency and other essential security operations and that the number of daily movements would be very limited. Secondly, the provision of sufficient handling capacity comparable to that at the Sheung Wan site would involve additional reclamation. Reclamation for commercial uses would unlikely comply with the Protection of the Harbour Ordinance (PHO). According to the judgment handed down by the Court of Final Appeal in January 2004 in respect of the PHO, reclamation proposals must satisfy the “overriding public need” test. This test can hardly be satisfied in the present case when an alternative site involving no reclamation is available in Sheung Wan.

Consultation

11. We consulted the LegCo ES Panel on the proposed heliport development in Sheung Wan on 7 December 2004. Panel Members reaffirmed their support for the provision of the facility and agreed that it should be located in close proximity to the Central Business District. In view of the helicopter operators’ views, the Panel requested the Administration to further consider the feasibility of allowing shared use of the proposed GFS heliport in Wan Chai by commercial operators. A joint meeting of the LegCo ES Panel and PLW Panel would be held on 31 January 2005 to further discuss the issue.

12. We would consult the Central and Western District Council (C&W DC) on the proposed heliport in Sheung Wan on 20 January 2005.

C&W DC members have already expressed strong objection to the project. They are concerned about the adverse noise impact caused by helicopter operation on neighbouring areas, in particular the adjacent Sun Yat Sen Memorial Park. We would explain fully how the design of the heliport could address their environmental concerns.

Statutory Processes

13. Subject to the outcome of the public consultation exercise, we will conduct an EIA to ensure that the proposed development would meet all relevant statutory environmental requirements. In addition, we will submit an application to the Town Planning Board to rezone the site from “Government, Institution or Community” and “Open Space” to “Other Specified Uses (Heliport)”.

Development Programme

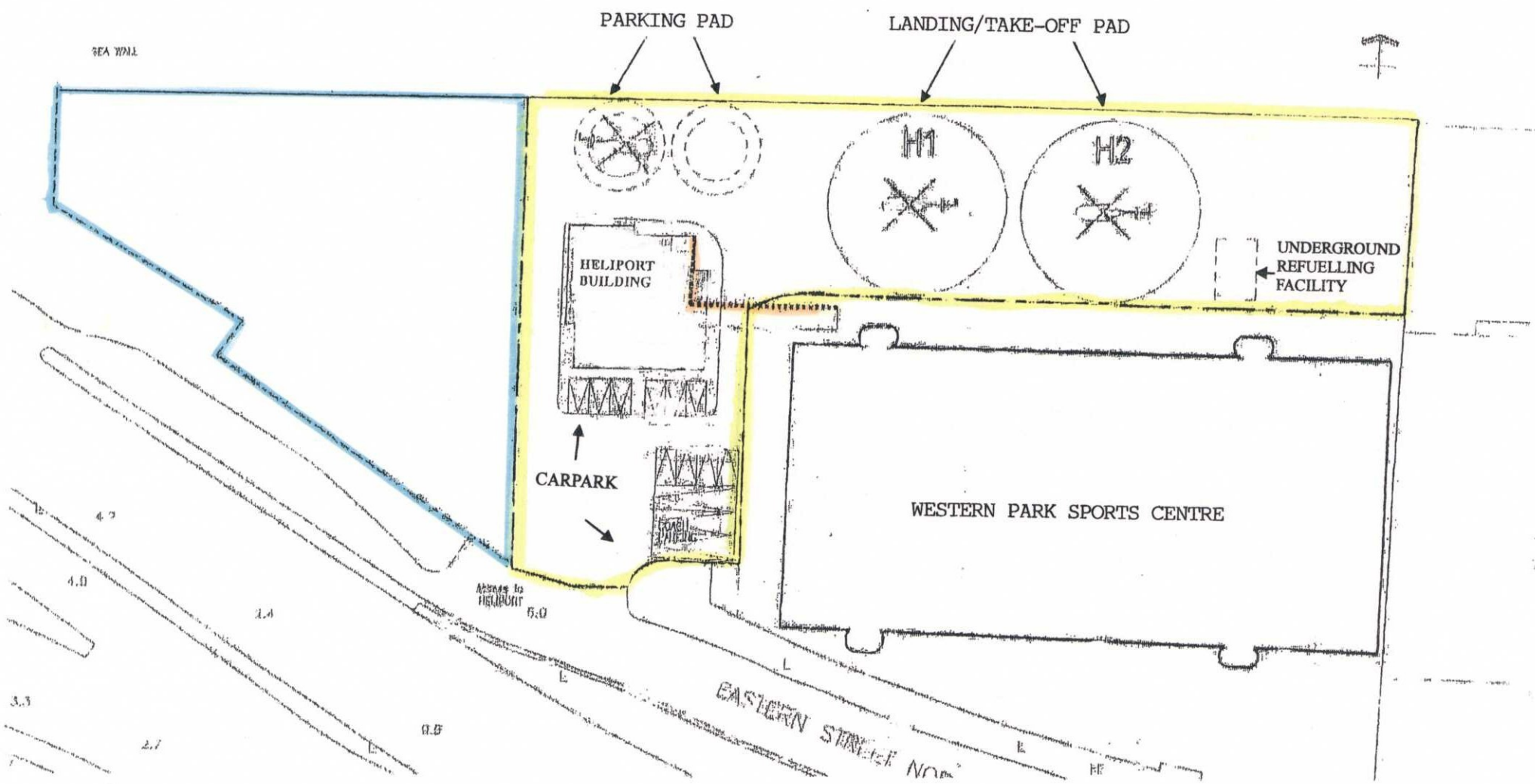
14. Taking into account the time required for public consultation, statutory environmental impact assessment, rezoning, tendering and construction, it is expected that the permanent domestic heliport would be put into operation in early 2008. We will continue to explore whether this timetable could be further compressed to enable early completion of the permanent heliport.

Views Sought

15. Members are invited to comment on the proposal.

Economic Development and Labour Bureau
January 2005

Layout Plan of Proposed Domestic Heliport in Sheung Wan



Site area of 7,400m²

 Heliport of 4,400m²

 Noise barrier

 Reserved area of 3,000m² for future expansion