

Facts or Myths?

A letter in Talkback of 24 February sets out five "Facts" that question the need for the Central Wanchai Bypass (CWB). Allow me to respond.

"Fact 1" alleges that building more roads will only increase traffic and will not relieve congestion. Our assessment, based on transport model study recognised by experts in the field, is that CWB will relieve congestion on the Connaught Road Central/Harcourt Road/Gloucester Road Corridor. It will reduce the current driving time of 15 minutes from Rumsey Street to Causeway Bay to 5 minutes. Without CWB, the driving time for that 4 km of road will deteriorate to 45 minutes by 2011. The existing Island Eastern Corridor that was completed in the 80's to relieve the then serious traffic congestion on King's Road is but one solid example to refute "Fact 1".

"Fact 2" states that the underutilized Western Harbour Crossing (WHC), due probably to a higher toll, is a likely attribute to the congestion on the Corridor. The suggestion to make better use of the three existing cross-harbour tunnels to re-distribute traffic is also raised in different letters published in Talkback on 26 and 28 February. We have in fact tested different possibilities of toll level for the three cross-harbour tunnels, and evaluated the case in which Cross Harbour Tunnel (CHT) charges a higher level of toll than WHC. Under

that scenario, WHC would experience a great surge in patronage, a substantial proportion of which diverted from CHT. However, the traffic heading for Wanchai and the eastern part of Hong Kong Island would still have to pass through Central District, and vice versa. As a result, it would put further strain on Connaught Road Central and the road network in the Central Business District (CBD) if CWB were not built to relieve those roads. Therefore, fiddling with the tunnel tolls in such a way, even if practicable, would only exacerbate the congestion problem.

“Fact 3” points out that road pricing has not been tested in Central and Wanchai. This is correct. However, electronic road pricing, which I think the article is referring to, can only complement CWB but cannot replace it. It would be unfair to ask those who want to by-pass CBD to pay. Like in London and Singapore, implementation of ERP in Hong Kong needs to be supported by an alternative route or bypass with sufficient capacity to receive the diverted traffic generated from those wishing to avoid entering the charging zone. This points to the need for CWB.

“Fact 4” suggests that bus transport has not been rationalised. In fact, the number of bus trips through Central has been reduced by more than 15% since 1999. We will continue our effort on this front.

“Fact 5” points out that elevated bypasses are not conducive to harbour front enhancement. We are in complete agreement with the view that it is important to protect Victoria Harbour – our invaluable natural asset. That is precisely why we are working closely with the Harbour-front Enhancement Committee, other relevant bodies and members of the community, to minimise the extent of any reclamation required for providing CWB, and think of practicable options for enhancing our harbour front.

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