

# 'Double standards' jibe on harbor plan

Dennis Chong

Another round of controversy over the highly-contentious Central-Wanchai bypass — which the government has insisted on building above newly-reclaimed land — is likely to be sparked today when two consultant reports are presented to the Town Planning Board.

Harbor activists, who renewed the debate this week by accusing the government of barring them from presenting their case at the meeting, claim the government has used double standards in assessing technical reports, making an analogy with the recent West Kowloon controversy where it was revealed that the government had ignored an experts' panel which rejected the much-debated canopy idea.

Save Our Shorelines, a main advocate for an underwater tunnel for the Central section of the bypass, said that the consultants — hired by the government — did not rule out the possibility of the tunnel, other than suggesting there could be technical problems.

On Thursday, SOS activists appealed to board members who are scheduled to discuss the tunnel proposal today, to "read the lines [of the reports] carefully" before making a decision.

A legislator warned that, if the tunnel proposal is possible, dismissing the group's case may lead to further litigation based on a court ruling last year which said any reclamation must be minimal and pass a test of "overriding public needs."

In a surprise move, the Housing, Planning and Lands Bureau said late Thursday that the meeting may be delayed by two weeks. The spokes-

person said the bureau will let board members decide on the "unprecedented" suggestion of allowing activists into the meeting. Should they decide to allow the activists to present their case, the meeting will have to be delayed.

In any event, the discussion on the activists' proposal will be held behind closed doors.

The government had said the rezoning submissions from the group were processed before a new law amendment that makes open meetings possible. According to the consultant reports obtained by *The Standard*, the tunnel proposal "may deserve some consideration as an alternative to the current cut-and-cover construction method," but will meet "too many constraints" that it should not be "considered reasonably practical."

The reports, compiled by Maunsell Consultants Asia and Hyder Consultants, pointed to 25 design deficiencies of the tunnel.

In a 24-page report, Maunsell said that SOS's proposed road alignments will prevent the tunnel from connecting to existing roads. Pumping stations — currently used for cooling systems for various buildings in Central, including the HSBC headquarters and the Central Government Offices — may not be able to operate during the building of the tunnel.

Also, the tunnel would affect a People's Liberation Army berth due to be built there.

The consultant, which has been involved in the design and construction of the Eastern harbor crossing and the Airport Railway Harbor Crossing, said there is also a risk of a ship hitting the



Piling works to the left of a Star Ferry in Victoria Harbour mark the start of the controversial reclamation project. AFP

tunnel. For all the constraints to be resolved, the open-water section through which the tunnel would be installed will be reduced from 950 meters to around 350 meters.

Hyder, which acts as a third party in the assessment, agreed with Maunsell that the tunnel would not be feasible.

However, John Bowden, chairman of SOS, said all constraints are surmountable through good engineering. For example, submerged rock barriers could be put up to prevent ships from grounding.

New cooling systems could also be built before removing the existing ones.

"If you read carefully, the reports show it is not impossible," he said.

He accused the government of "using the rules to suit themselves" by making an analogy to the West Kowloon controversy.

In April, the media revealed that the architectural and planning experts panel appointed by the government in 2002 rejected the huge canopy for the West Kowloon cultural development, which the government has made a prerequisite

The report, which was later made available to the Legislative Council, said the canopy "could be difficult to implement in practice" and that "the

ownership, management and maintenance of the canopy could well present problems."

The comments triggered a series of political repercussions, with legislators doubting the government's credibility in supporting the canopy plan. The government said the experts' report "was not part of the assessment procedure" and the doubts were only "general comments."

"The West Kowloon case is a very good comparison," Bowden said, adding that "the shoe is now on the other foot."

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