

Let hearings be open to public, say harbor groups

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Three harbor concern groups Tuesday demanded that the government open to the public a hearing on their proposals, which could see the Central reclamation plans scaled down.

The Town Planning Board will discuss Friday three submissions by the groups to alter the outline zoning plans for an area in Central where fill-in work has been ongoing since the government was given the court's green light to go ahead several months ago.

The government has suspended work on the Wan Chai reclamation pending a review to determine if it

passes the "overriding public need test" laid down by the Court of Final Appeal in January 2004.

The suggestions by the Society for Protection of the Harbour, Save our Shorelines and Clear the Air include reducing the size of the reclamation, for which 18 hectares has been designated, and restricting commercial development on the reclaimed land.

Activists also argue that it is feasible to replace the over-water Central-Wan Chai bypass with an immersed tube tunnel.

If board members agree with their arguments, they will suggest the government reviews its reclamation plans.

Christine Loh, chairwoman of the Society for Protection of the Harbour, said the Donald Tsang administration should show it is determined to improve governance by opening up the meetings to the public. "Openness and fairness are the key principles of good governance," she said.

Since last month, the board has been allowed to open its meetings to the public to encourage civic participation in the planning process.

However, according to a Town Planning Board spokesman, the submissions for changes to the harbor reclamation plans were made before the enactment of the law which means that

representatives of the three groups will not be able to attend the meetings and present their case. The spokesman added that having closed-doors meetings is a "long-established" practice.

"According to the board's long established practice, consideration of rezoning requests submitted before the commencement of the Amendment Ordinance is carried out in the absence of the proponents and the meetings are not open," he said.

But Loh said that by opening up the meeting the administration will be able to demonstrate its determination to improve governance, adding that nobody else can present their cases.

She added the government should stop government officials from chairing board meetings to avoid conflicts of interest.

The meeting will be chaired by Permanent Secretary for the Housing, Planning and Lands Bureau Rita Lau. Activists are planning to go to the venue in an attempt to get in.

The HK\$3.75 billion Central phase III reclamation will form a crucial part of the Central-Wan Chai bypass. The activists have said a bypass can be done with much less reclamation.

The government said Lau has no conflicts of interests on the subject. dennis.chong@singtaonewscorp.com