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Speech by the Hon Mrs Selina Chow Liang Shuk-ye, GBS, JP Motion Debate on Developing Elevated Pedestrian Walkway Systems, 20 November 2002

Selina Chow:

Madam President, the Liberal Party supports the "pedestrian priority" principle. However, this principle should absolutely not form the only base for elevated pedestrian walkway systems. The Liberal Party is of the view that, in addition to elevated footbridges, a wide range of options should be adopted. At the same time, the impact of the policy on the cityscape, pedestrian flow and business environment should be taken into account.

To start with, I have to convey the strong opposition of the industry represented by me. It is opined that, in the course of carrying out major works such as elevated pedestrian walkway systems, the pedestrian flow, traffic and shop businesses will definitely be affected. The catering industry, represented by Mr Tommy CHEUNG, has raised strong opposition too. Now Mongkok Road has to be sealed to make way for the construction of elevated pedestrian walkways. The Liberal Party has interviewed more than 50 shops situated near Sai Yee Street, Mong Kok and the footbridge linking New Century Plaza. The pedestrian flow outside these shops, engaging mainly in such retail businesses as catering, fashion and stationery, is the chief source of shop customers.

Among the shop operators interviewed, 90% opined that, after the commencement of construction of the footbridges, the pedestrian flow outside their shops had shrunk obviously, and their turnover had dropped between 10% to 50%. This explains why 75% of the operators opposed the construction of pedestrian footbridges for their practical experience proved that footbridges would divert the pedestrian flow and impact seriously on their business. The impact on food premises is even more severe for the construction works will cause air and noise pollution. The chaotic layout of streets and roads subsequent to the construction of footbridges will not only affect the cityscape, some shop entrances and signboards will be hidden from sight too. According to some property agents in the district, a number of shops in the vicinity have unusually been left vacant since August. They estimated that the retailers had decided to relocate their shops for fear that the pedestrian flow would disappear after the completion of the footbridges.

If the proposal of the original motion is to build the "elevated corridors" as conceived in the report compiled by the Democratic Party where shops and cafes will be provided, pedestrians will possibly stay away from the ground and use footbridges instead. By then, the business of

ground floor shops will definitely shrink drastically. Although Hong Kong people have always liked going out and shopping, the mode of Hong Kong as a Shoppers' Paradise will definitely change radically as a result of this. On the other hand, ground floor shops will divert some of the pedestrian flow and, at the same time, affect the business of shops operating on the footbridges. This will eventually result in a "lose-lose" situation.

The proposal raised by the Democratic Party to construct a footbridge stretching from Western District to Causeway Bay has met with strong opposition from shop owners operating in Hennessy Road for fear that the construction works will seriously affect traffic and the pedestrian flow. Consequently, they will suffer the disadvantages before they can get the benefits. Recent examples are the expansion project being carried out at the Tsim Sha Tsui MTR Station and the road blocking measures taken in connection with the construction works carried out by the Kowloon-Canton Railway Corporation. As a result of these works, the shops nearby are seriously affected. The blow to be dealt to shop operators by the construction of elevated pedestrian walkway systems of such a scale is indeed conceivable.

The Retail Management Association has specially requested me to make it clear that the Association and its members are firmly against Dr LAW Chi-kwong's proposal. It has also been pointed out by the construction and engineering sectors that there are a number of technical problems with the construction of elevated pedestrian walkway systems. As the systems will straddle a number of district administration regions and involve a large number of buildings, the construction and maintenance fees will be exorbitant, so who is going to be responsible? Elevated footbridges are suitable for short-distance walk only. They can by no means replace public transport. What is more, shops operating on the footbridges are likely to affect the property value of the districts in which they are built.

Dr YEUNG Sum stated earlier that tourism will be benefitted by the elevated pedestrian walkway systems. However, I have never heard of any requests by tourists or the industry to build elevated pedestrian walkway systems. I have only heard the strong opposition raised by the services industry, which relies heavily on tourist shopping in an indirect manner. Therefore, Dr YEUNG Sum's remark appears to be just his wishful thinking.

To enable Hong Kong to become a "pedestrian priority" city, many other options can be considered, in addition to the construction of elevated footbridges. Ms Miriam LAU will discuss this in detailed later.

In the hope of separating pedestrians and vehicles, the proposal of the original motion is actually targeted at air pollution. It was pointed out in a well-known travel guide, Lonely Planet, that air pollution in the territory in recent years is bound to have an impact on tourists who like

to tour Hong Kong on foot. We support the Government's various initiatives to improve air quality. At the same time, additional pedestrian precincts, promenades, and so on, should be set up in districts with clean air, such as Tsim Sha Tsui and Stanley, to make the seaside even more attractive. In doing so, it will not be necessary for elevated pedestrian walkway systems to be built. While the construction of footbridges might impede sightseeing, tourists will feel more relaxing if they can talk a stroll along the seaside.

At present, there are more than 500 footbridges in Hong Kong. If Honourable Members could take a closer look at them, they will find that most of the footbridges are dull and unattractive. The Government should really pay attention to the presentation and design of these footbridges to enable Hong Kong to better match its identity as a modernized international city in Asia.

The Liberal Party supports Mr IP Kwok-him's amendment. As Dr YEUNG Sum merely requests the Government not to affect the business environment as far as possible, the Liberal Party finds it impossible to support his amendment. We can definitely not compromise because we have to protect the business environment, particularly nowadays when ground floor shops are struggling hard to survive. We firmly oppose Dr LAW Chi-kwong's original motion. I am not going to repeat our reasons for I have already cited them in my speech.