

590 jobs may go in transport hive-off

By FANNY WONG
and JEREMY LAU

THE Transport Department may face an unprecedented cut of 590 posts, or a third of its total staff, should an ambitious package to hive off a number of transport services be implemented.

Steps are being taken to identify privatisation opportunities in light of the Government's austerity drive and the Transport Department, with its total staff of about 1,800, emerged as having a high potential in this regard.

According to a draft plan drawn up by transport officials, all of the five government-run tunnels, the Kowloon Bay vehicle examination centre, the 14,200 on-street parking meters, the routine road worthiness inspection of motor vehicles, the licensing of vehicles and drivers and driving tests could be hived off in the next four years.

Substantial savings on recurrent expenses, which mostly cover staff costs, are expected should the privatisation plan get final approval.

Officials said the staff implications arising from the plan were based on the most recent study findings and the plan would be reassessed in 1992.

They stressed they were still at the stage of looking into the feasibility of contracting out these services to non-government agencies despite a tentative implementation programme having been drawn up.

Although staff arrangements is an issue still to be addressed, it is understood that any redundant staff would be redeployed within the civil service as far as possible.

"A solution will have to be found which need not necessarily be that they [staff] are laid off completely," an official said.

It is argued that the privatisation programme will result in substantial savings in the recurrent account, which will be beneficial to public coffers in the long run.

Currently, the Government owns five tunnel systems — the Aberdeen Tunnel, the Lion Rock Tunnel, the Tseung Kwan O Tunnel, the Shing Mun Tunnels and the Airport Tunnel.

Under the tentative implementation programme drafted by the department, privatisation of the five tun-

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nel systems would take place in three phases and be completed by 1994.

The first phase is to hive off the management of the Aberdeen Tunnel, which has been approved by the Executive Council.

The implementation of this phase is already underway.

It is envisaged that in each of the subsequent phases, two other tunnels would be privatised but the order in which this would happen has yet to be decided.

The Aberdeen Tunnel aside, the Governor-in-Council has also approved the privatisation of the operation and maintenance of the Kowloon Bay vehicle examination centre.

It is understood the Government will appraise the contracting-out arrangements of the Aberdeen Tunnel and the vehicle examination centre at the end of 1992 in order to work out the best formula for privatising the remaining government-owned tunnels and vehicle examination centres.

Other contracting-out opportunities being studied by the Transport Department include the supply, op-

eration and maintenance of on-street parking meters.

Privatisation in this area could be completed by as early as 1993.

The draft implementation programme also envisages the privatisation by 1993 of the service for renewing licences for vehicles and drivers.

Written and practical driving tests, which have been administered by the Government since they came into force, could also be privatised by 1993 and 1994 respectively, according to the draft implementation programme.

In light of the heavy workload and complexity of the job, the Government proposes to create an extra assistant commissioner for transport post, for a period of two years.

The post will be reviewed by March 1993.

The chairman of the Government Transport Assistants Union, Mr Lo Bing-sang, said yesterday that the union had been aware of the department's plans for some time.

Mr Lo believed the department would eventually scrap the entire tunnel section and have all 400 tunnel staff laid off.

He said he had asked for

details of the plans when he attended the department's grades consultation conference on Tuesday, which was chaired by the Assistant Commissioner for Transport (Management and Licensing), Mr Ernest Lee Shu-wing.

Mr Lo said he was told during the meeting that the department was only working on the privatisation of the Aberdeen Tunnel and had no plans or schedule for privatising other tunnels.

"As a result, we were told in the meeting that it would be meaningless to discuss things like staff redundancy and transfer within the department or to other government departments at the moment," he said.

According to a recent survey, more than 90 per cent of the union's 210 members, whose duties include toll collecting and vehicle recovery in times of accidents, were not against the department's plans to cut manpower and to privatise some of its services, Mr Lo said.

"But we should be allowed to get what we deserve, like sufficient severance payment and the equal chances of being transferred to other posts or departments," he said.