

More civil servants mean heftier rent bills

A 'growing' Govt feels the pinch

by
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RAPID expansion in the number of civil servants outpaces the Government's building programme, forcing it to lease expensive office and living accommodation.

And the long-felt demand is not expected to slacken till the middle of the decade when a number of Government projects start to come on stream.

An additional 45,000 square metres of office space and over 100 residential quarters are presently being sought by the civil service.

The leasing programme for this financial year envisages a need for 90,000 square metres of office space and 200 quarters. They are in addition to the 250,000 square metres and 850 quarters already rented by the Government this April.

Government spending on rental and fitting-out work for the newly-leased property has soared from last year's \$296 million to \$550 million this year.

In an interview with the Standard, Secretariat Administration Branch (Accommodation) assistant director Charles Myhill said this is "a peak year" in terms of new property leased.

"It is a particular heavy year. It will be the largest amount we leased in one financial year," Mr Myhill remarked.

The reason, he said, is because of a rapid expansion by the Government to cope with public demand for more services of all kinds.

Official figures show the civil service has increased from last financial year's 141,133 people to this year's 151,809.

Mr Myhill said there will be a continual growth in the demand for leased office accommodation and quarters in the coming years, though the rate of growth may not be as great as that of the current year.

The increasing demand would also mean a sustained dependence on premises in the private sector. The trend, however, is expected to change by around 1985 when there will be more Government-owned buildings and redeveloped Government quarters, he said.

Though Government building programmes are presently lagging behind the buildup of the civil service, Mr Myhill said, it is the Government's ultimate aim to house its departments and staff in its own buildings and quarters as this would be far more economical.

On office accommodation, Mr Myhill expects the running down of leased accommodation to begin in the next half of the 1990s.

In the meantime, he said, the Government would whenever possible get the "cheapest suitable accommodation" that is available to meet its need.

STEADY PROGRESS

At present the Government is renting 57,000 square metres of office space in Central, at a monthly rental of \$3.6 million.

This property is leased because of "operational requirements" for some departments, Mr Myhill said.

"We only lease when we have to and when we don't have Government offices to accommodate expansion," he said.

For the current year, he said, "steady progress" to reach the target of the leasing programme is being made, adding that about 45,000 more square metres of office space will be required to meet the anticipated need for the remaining six months.

Mr Myhill described leasing negotiations between the Rating and Valuation Department and developers as something "ongoing" and "routine".

He mentioned the Mirror Tower where talks to lease a whole block to house the Immigration Department headquarters are nearing the final stage.

The situation for providing living quarters to civil servants on Master Pay Scale Point 48 and above is no better.

Again, because of rapid expansion in the civil service and an apparent lack of Government quarters to accommodate those eligible, about 70 expatriate civil servants were forced to stay in hotels early this month.

But the situation will be eased, said Mr Myhill, as many plans are in the pipeline, including the redevelopment of old quarters and the development of new sites.

At present, the Government is leasing slightly over 900 flats of all grades for civil servants earning \$15,860 and above. A batch of 41 units in Harbour City are the latest to be leased.

He said the target was for 90 per cent of those eligible to be housed in Government quarters. But meeting the target "depends on how quickly we can push the redevelopment projects and how quickly the civil service expands," he said.

Government buildings to come on stream, in their order of completion include:

- Harbour Building in Connaught Road next to the Rumsey Street carpark building. The 25-storey block when completed in early 1984, will provide a net office area of 27,000 square metres.

- First of the four complexes on the Wanchai reclamation site is to be completed by October 1984. The four buildings will eventually provide a gross area of 270,000 square metres.

- The Queensway Building adjacent to the new Supreme Court building on the site of Victoria Barracks.

The building will provide a net area of 54,600 square metres and is expected to be completed by 1985-86.

- The most ambitious project is the redevelopment of the site housing Central Government Offices, Beaconsfield House and a Government carpark.

Mr Myhill said the project is to be divided into four phases with the first to commence in 1984.

The whole project consisting of six blocks, is not expected to be completed till the early 1990's. It will eventually provide a gross floor area of 300,000 square metres — a 10-fold increase when compared with the present blocks.