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\$30b scheme for three new rail lines unveiled

By TAD STONER

PLANNERS have called for the construction of three railways by 2001, costing up to \$30 billion, and linking Central with Hongkong's new airport, Kowloon with the New Territories, and Kwun Tong with Junk Bay.

The plans were outlined yesterday in the long-awaited White Paper on Transport Policy in Hongkong that will form the core of the territory's policies for the next decade and calls for a \$55 billion outlay on development of both road and rail systems.

The largest and most expensive of the trio of rail projects will be a cross-harbour link that will speed passengers the 31 kilometres from western Hongkong Island to the new Chek Lap Kok airport, with intermediate commuter stops along the West Kowloon coastline.

A second system will link the Mass Transit Railway (MTR) terminus at Tsuen Wan with either Tuen Mun or Yuen Long, although railway officials have indicated that the Yuen Long alternative offers the best alignment for both construction and patronage.

The third line is the long-discussed three-kilometre MTR spur to Junk Bay.

The White Paper, which was released by the Secre-



Michael Leung

tary for Transport, Mr Michael Leung Man-kin, said the rail links were part of a strategy to encourage off-street transport.

"Without the railways, there would be a serious deterioration in traffic conditions as the large number of passengers now travelling by trains would have to turn to other forms of transport," it said.

The report called for development of a balanced network of public transport services, but said railways were the best alternative to road use.

"Further extension of the rail network may be necessary once the population in certain developing areas reaches the threshold that makes the new line economically viable," it said.

Economics, however, are likely to be the largest hurdle to the plan.

Kowloon-Canton Railway Corporation (KCRC) officials have estimated the cost of the airport link at between \$15 billion and \$20 billion, with revenues limited by the lack of patronage between Tsing Yi Island and Chek Lap Kok.

The line is scheduled for completion in early 1997, in time for the opening of the first of Chek Lap Kok's two runways.

Officially, the link between Tsuen Wan and the Light Rail Transit System has not been aligned, although the former MTR chairman, Mr Wilfrid Newton, said last year that a medium-rail line to Yuen Long was the more attractive route, particularly because of difficult terrain along the coast to Tuen Mun.

However, the construction of the north-south highway, Route 3, from Lok Ma Chau through Yuen Long to the new Western Harbour Crossing is on an alignment that duplicates the 12-kilometre railway proposal, damaging its economic feasibility.

The MTR's Junk Bay extension involves a spur from the Kwun Tong line, through the surrounding mountains and into the new town. Railway officials have said the project would not be

viable until the area's population hits 325,000, which is some years away.

Mr Leung said that the airport railway had the highest priority among the three, and that studies would be led by the MTR beginning in February.

"As of next month, we'll be studying the line to the airport," he said.

"The study will be completed by the end of the year, and then we'll discuss the financial arrangements with the MTR.

"We will start studies of the other railways by the end of the year, and complete them by the middle of next year, and by the time the airport link is finished, we can look at the northwest railway, Junk Bay and the third harbour crossing," Mr Leung said.

The White Paper said that because the airport railway would provide a third harbour crossing, the need for another Kowloon-Hongkong link would be greatly reduced, but that relief was badly needed for the congested KCR-MTR interchange in Kowloon Tong.

In July, the KCRC proposed a \$2 billion cross-harbour link between Mongkok and Fortress Hill that would eliminate crowding at the interchange where New Territories riders move to the MTR's urban and trans-harbour service.

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Graphic by Paul Best

