

Barma voted a \$90m farewell gift

By Cecilia So

SECRETARY for Transport Haider Barma received a farewell present from the Legislative Council yesterday after the finance committee approved his request for \$90 million to pay for a consultancy feasibility study on the Electronic Road Pricing scheme.

Mr Barma's resignation from the department takes effect on 13 June. He will soon assume his new job as chairman of the Public Service Commission.

The \$90 million will allow the government to conduct studies on the project which, if adopted, will charge motorists entering certain areas during peak traffic hours.

With the Democratic Party

and the Association for Democracy and People's Livelihood (ADPL) backing the government study, the debate was settled in a vote — 28 in favour and 19 against.

Mr Barma expressed delight at the outcome.

ADPL vice-chairman Bruce Liu Sing-lee said intense lobbying by the government paved the way for the approval of the fund.

The ADPL and the Democratic Party both supported the government's funding request as both parties thought it could significantly help ease the traffic congestion problem.

The Liberal Party and the Democratic Alliance for the Betterment of Hong Kong (DAB) opposed the scheme.

Transport and communication functional constituency representative Miriam Lau Kin-ye, of the Liberal Party, said her group supported the road pricing scheme and its "user-pays" principle.

"What we object to is the government's approach to the study," she said. "We insist that the field evaluation should not be done in parallel with the desk-top study."

The Liberal Party suggested that the field evaluation part of the study be delayed until after the desk-top survey had showed that the scheme was feasible.

Money would be totally wasted if the desk-top study revealed that the road pricing system could in no way be implemented in Hong Kong, Ms Lau said.

DAB member Ip Kwok-him said his party opposed the "user-pays" principle because it would punish all motorists.

"At the end of the day, people may have to pay for the government's economic benefits. The consequences would be very negative," he said.

During the meeting, the administration reiterated that the pricing scheme offered "a more efficient and flexible way" to deal with traffic congestion.

Regular reports about the study, which is to begin early next year and last 27 months, will be provided to Legco.

The final charging system will be sent to the future Special Administrative Region legislature for approval.

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