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Boards put ERP on rocky road

by
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THE government has got the "thumbs down" sign from district boards in its efforts to sell them the idea of the controversial electronic road pricing (ERP) scheme.

The last of the 18 boards to be briefed by transport officials was Wanchai, whose members yesterday expressed strong opposition to the government's proposal.

The meeting was the last in the authorities' second round of consultations with the boards.

The verdict is clear. Only two boards — North and Islands — had indicated that the idea could be acceptable but only if the government reduces the car licence fees as promised.

The Secretary for Transport, Mr Alan Scott, had earlier told board members that the government would not go ahead with the scheme if there was strong opposition.

Scott said yesterday he was not asking for a final decision from board members, but added that he was there with other officials to brief them on the progress and to answer whatever questions they might have on the ERP.

Transport officials have been heavily criticised at almost every board meeting since the end of November when they embarked on the ERP "promotion" exercise.

They were armed with an 18-minute film on how the ERP could, and should, be used to ease congestion, but members were not convinced.

The most severe criticism came from the urban district boards whose areas would be directly affected by the scheme.

As for the New Territories, most members expressed fears that the scheme would later be extended to their areas.

Scott denied there had been an unfavourable response from the boards.

"It's not an overwhelming objection. If you study the various records of DBs, you'll see that there has been an understanding of the problem (congestion) and this is the important thing.

"The second thing is, we have been talking about a number of possible solutions. Thirdly, it isn't until May that we'll get the final set of information.

"I am not going to answer which board has and which board hasn't raised objections as no board has been asked to make a final decision and no chairman has summed up and said this, that or the other," Scott said.

Transport officials would now go back to all district boards in May for a third round of consultations during which members would be explained the ERP system, the survey result on public response to the pricing system and the feasibility of the \$350 million pilot scheme in which 2,600 vehicles would take part.

Scott said that after this, the proposals would be passed on to the Transport Advisory Committee and the Executive Council if there was any need for new laws to be drafted.

A final decision on whether the government would implement the scheme would be made in September.

But he again stressed that the scheme would not be implemented "if it was not understood, accepted or satisfactory".

In the second round of consultations, though chairmen of the boards did not sum up the views of members, the general tone of members who gave their opinions were against the scheme.

The consensus of members was that the government was using a "threatening tone" to push the scheme and that the alternative was a drastic increase in licence fees.

Scott has mentioned a figure of \$20,000 annual fee by 1991, and has also given board members figures and charts to support this.

Another criticism by members was that the government was determined to go ahead with the pilot scheme without seeking public opinion beforehand.

At yesterday's meeting, all members who spoke on the subject objected to its implementation.

Scott also stressed at yesterday's meeting that the government would continue to spend \$1.6 million on roadworks, but the problem of congestion could not wait any longer.