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# Briefing groups can 17-15 expect a DB grilling

It is difficult to predict how the 19 district boards will tackle the complicated and controversial Electronic Road Pricing scheme when the topic comes under their scrutiny in the next two weeks.

Some Government officials regard a number of district boards as very volatile and their attitude as unpredictable.

They believe that the way the meetings are conducted and how matters develop will depend very much on the style of the board chairmen.

Transport Branch officials, however, are taking a "come what may" attitude and plan to leave the initiative to board members, rather than go on the offensive.

The Secretary for Transport, Mr Ian Macpherson, will lead a briefing team to the Wanchai District Board tomorrow to begin the first in a series of consultations among the 19 boards.

Mr Macpherson's style is very different from that of his predecessor, Mr Alan Scott, and it is believed that his "Mr Good Guy" image could help quell the emotional outbursts which appeared in the former rounds of consultations when Mr Scott had the floor.

And although new to the Transport Branch, Mr Macpherson, once the Commissioner for Transport, has been studying hard on the issue and is understood to have now taken a much firmer personal stand.

Some district board members, such as those from Central, Western and Southern, are also working very hard to obtain a fuller picture of the issue to better equip themselves while delivering their views.

The briefing teams expect a grilling from professionals — especially lawyers — as one of them said "they have the willingness and ability to understand as well being sceptical" by the nature of their jobs.

But the ERP scheme is undoubtedly a complicated issue and many board members

are expected to take an hour or so before being able to grasp the subject fully.

The meetings will start with an hour of general briefing, although this schedule could be abused by some boards, sources said.

Members of the briefing teams were reminded to keep their tempers, especially in the first half hour and hope that the message on the general aspects of the system can get across to the board in the allotted hour.

Officials said there could be further debate on the principles of the scheme and constructive arguments are not expected until the final hour.

Transport officials said the district board consultations could take from 90 minutes to 2½ hours.

It will be a heavy schedule for the four briefing teams, respectively headed by Mr Macpherson, his two deputies, Mr Keith Broadbridge and Mr Christopher Wong, as well as the Principal Assistant Secretary, Mr Michael Clancy.

Consultations at the 19 district boards will be squeezed into 12 working days resulting in many cases in two boards being briefed on the same day and one extreme case when three boards will meet on this in one day.

There is a deliberate attempt by the Transport Branch this time to pack in a tight schedule to avoid "the appearance of excess controversy."

One official said in the last round of consultation which took about three months, people saw the reporting of the same doubts and questions being recorded at meeting after meeting, making the issue more controversial than it really was.

Some board members saw the "controversial ERP scheme" in the news and followed it up, resulting in a spiralling adverse effect publicity-wise.

This time it is hoped that the issue will be discussed in a "calm and objective way," an official said.