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Audit director lashes out at ERP scheme

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There should have been more alternatives to the controversial and costly electronic road pricing proposal, according to the Director of Audit, Mr Norman Stalker, who yesterday launched a scathing attack on the Government's failure to enforce other feasible and recommended means of controlling road congestion.

Mr Stalker described government "inefficiency and inconsistencies" in its transport policy in past years.

A review of government transport policy in the wake of a \$37 million ERP pilot test led Mr Stalker to conclude: "Over the years there have been inefficiencies, including delays, uncertainties and inconsistencies in the implementation of Government policy."

"Consequently the number of alternative options to electronic road pricing have been reduced," Mr Stalker said in his report tabled in the Legislative Council yesterday.

He said the Government's failure to adhere to restraint

measures over taxi growth and the provision of parking spaces as proposed in the 1979 transport White Paper to reduce road congestion was the biggest cause of today's headache.

Mr Stalker argued that the package of restraint measures including those on taxis and parking spaces set out in the paper were designed to achieve similar objectives as the ERP system without the high capital and recurrent costs.

A full ERP scheme would cost \$240 million to imple-

ment.

Mr Stalker lashed out at the Secretary for Transport for pressing ahead with the pilot test of an ERP scheme in 1982 without reconsidering all the options.

Mr Stalker said the transport chief, against the advice of consultants for further studies of other options, apparently believed that Hongkong's only options were either road pricing or higher vehicle taxes.

And of all contradictions in executing transport policy, Mr Stalker said the failure to

check the growth in the number of taxis had the most damaging effects on the war against traffic congestion.

Against advice both from consultants and people within the Government, Mr Stalker said the Governor-in-Council had persistently ordered more taxi licences to be issued since 1981.

At the same time, the policy-making body again defied recommendations that taxi fares be raised to a higher level to suppress demand for taxis — an even less efficient road user than private

cars in many cases.

"The level of taxi fares is now lower in real terms than they were in 1979 when the White Paper stressed the importance of increasing them" as a means of reducing traffic congestion, Mr Stalker said.

Parking policy suffered from the same uncertainties.

Although the White Paper recommended car use be restrained through manipulation of parking spaces and charges, he said the Governor-in-Council again ruled to abandon the weapon of restriction in the provision of parking spaces.

The removal of the two restraint measures in the White Paper's package in combating congestion had pointed to a greater Government reliance than intended on increasing vehicle fees as a means of control.

In a prompt response, the Government yesterday argued that the forsaking of the two measures as criticised by Mr Stalker was a result of an evolving transport policy.

In a statement in Legco, a government spokesman said it was inappropriate for the Government to insist on sticking rigidly to measures devised some years ago and to refuse to consider new alternatives.

He said Mr Stalker had failed to appreciate the need for the Government to take economic, social and other constraints into account when formulating policy when launching his attack.