

S. C. M. P.

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AA loses its exclusive right to driving school

By FRANCIS LI

The Hongkong Automobile Association has lost its exclusive right to run the proposed off-street driving school in Aberdeen.

The Transport Department, frustrated by protracted wrangling with the AA over the project, has decided to put it up for tender in the next few months.

However, the department has reversed its earlier requirement that the school be run on a non-profit basis.

The AA, which initiated the idea early last year, recently threatened to withdraw from the project after negotiations with the department broke down.

The department was caught off guard by the threat, but decided to go ahead with the project by calling for tenders.

Transport officials said, however, that the successful bidder's profit would be controlled.

At least one commercial company has already expressed an interest in running the school, according to the department's chief executive officer (licensing), Mr Colin Priston.

Mr Priston said a decision by the Finance Branch on the proposal to turn the school into a profitable venture was expected within two months.

He said those who attended the school would be given high priority to take road tests to make the project more attractive.

Mr Priston said the AA would be entitled to bid when public tenders were invited.

But he stressed that the successful bidder would be supervised by the department to prevent excessive profits.

The AA's general committee had approved a \$3 million investment in the school, but it had demanded a longer lease to guarantee a return from its investment and possible profits, which it proposed to use to fund other operations.

Under the original proposals, the vacant 150,000 sq ft

site was to be handed back to the Urban Services Department in 1986 and the department had insisted that the school be run on a non-profit making basis.

Though the tenancy might seem short, Mr Priston said his department would try to talk the USD into making it a permanent establishment if it proved to be a success.

He said the tender for the site would include three requirements.

Besides administering the driving school, the operator must provide simulated driving facilities to familiarise students with road driving techniques.

Also, the school's management will be required to supply instructors to coach learner drivers on the road once they had completed the off-street course.

To achieve this, Mr Priston said the department would probably issue driving

instructor licences to qualified employees at the school.

Unlike the initial offer to give the AA use of the site for free, Mr Priston said rent would be charged to the successful bidder.

AA officials were not available for comment yesterday.

Meanwhile, the site will be used temporarily by independent driving instructors from 9 am to 6 pm to teach students basic driving skills off the street.

These instructors were charged a nominal fee to cover administrative costs, Mr Priston said.

He also disclosed that the department was looking at a control tip in Ngau Chi Wan for possible use as a second temporary off-street driving school.

Mr Priston said the department was also looking at sites in the New Territories to establish a permanent driving school.