

Bar from routes leads to CMB threat to withdraw new fleet

By TAD STONER

IN a challenge to transport authorities, China Motor Bus last week threatened to leave half its air-conditioned fleet idle after a Government refusal to allow the company to serve Ap Lei Chau Estate.

The Government said it would not condone such a move and threatened to alert local district boards.

Sources close to Citybus said the company might offer to exchange its own Ap Lei Chau residential route for CMB's Stanley service.

CMB's finance and planning manager, Mr Derek Nicholls, said the administration's refusal to allow the company to operate a 590 route to Ap Lei Chau was impeding the company's plans to upgrade its service.

"This is a crucial test," Mr Nicholls said.

"We told them in February we wanted to do this, and 14 days ago provided final details, but they have said it duplicates already-existing services.

"We are told that people have higher aspirations for better quality service, and we have met them

on the Chi Foo route, but now we are told we cannot at Ap Lei Chau. "I think we might leave our buses sitting in the depot, and that could ultimately involve seven or eight buses," he said.

CMB last month inaugurated its first air-conditioned service, the 537 between Chi Foo and Central, running parallel with a Citybus residential route to Admiralty.

Citing sufficient route capacity, however, the Government last week refused CMB's application for a new air-conditioned route, the 590 between Ap Lei Chau and

Central, running parallel with another air-conditioned Citybus residential service to Admiralty.

CMB is preparing a third application for a 597 route between Lei Tung Estate and Central, parallel to the third Citybus residential service.

Citybus obtained its three residential routes early this year in the wake of CMB's two-day drivers' strike in November. The action caused severe criticism of the operator's Southern District service, leading to calls for wholesale reform of the operation.

"We want the 590 route be-

cause it's in the best interest of our programme," Mr Nicholls said.

He rejected the authorities' recommendation that CMB instead deploy its buses in either Western District, Eastern District, Stanley or Wah Fu Estate.

"Does this mean we can't protect our market? Our plan is to cover both Wah Fu and Stanley next year, and Eastern District and Western District may not be viable," Mr Nicholls said.

"Why should we disrupt our plans? People in Ap Lei Chau will want these services."

A source close to policymakers

said, however, that Government did not want CMB to go head-to-head with Citybus.

"Why does CMB want to run these three routes? There is already adequate service, and there are other routes that need air-conditioned service," he said.

"We will not allow them to leave air-conditioned buses in the terminal, and while you can't force them into day-to-day operations, we think they should put the buses where they are needed.

"We may have to go to the district boards on this," the source said.

A source close to Citybus said the company would consider trading routes with CMB.

"Citybus has said it would give up its Ap Lei Chau route and take over Stanley with its own air-conditioned coaches, and CMB can put its Stanley coaches either at Ap Lei Chau or downgrade them," the source said.

"Citybus will be getting 50 new air-conditioned double-deckers in September, and will compete hell-for-leather with CMB. If CMB doesn't consolidate on their other routes, they could be crucified."