

About-face on Ocean Park handover plan

By MATTHEW LEUNG

IN a major reversal, the Executive Council now looks likely to drop a plan for the Urban Council to take over the running of Ocean Park.

The Governor's advisers are not convinced the park will be able in future to generate sufficient income to keep going.

The Royal Hongkong Jockey Club has wanted to turn the popular amusement park over to the council for some time, and earlier this month Urbco accepted the offer in principle.

Ocean Park, situated on a 200-acre Wong Chuk Hang site granted by the Government, opened in 1977 and ran at a loss until 1984.

It made a profit of about \$1 million in the 1984-85 financial year and about \$6 million in the 1985-86 year which ended last month.

The Jockey Club has four other possible options for the park. They are:

- Continue with the existing company plus a \$200-million endowment and amend the Articles of Association so that the Governor assumes responsibility for the appointment and removal of directors and members.

- Liquidate Ocean Park Limited and transfer the land and assets plus the \$200-million endowment to a trust foundation.

- Liquidate Ocean Park Limited and transfer the land, assets and operation of the park to a board established under a separate ordinance. This board would hold and invest the \$200-million endowment.

- Sell off the whole park to a commercial enterprise.

The club recently agreed to allocate, through the Jockey Club's Charities Company, \$200 million to a differently constituted Ocean Park Limited.

The Urbco has set up a four-member working group to study the take-over proposal but it has not yet received detailed statistics on the park's operation costs and revenue.

A group member, Mr

Samuel Wong, believed that the park's income relied to a great extent on visits by foreign tourists and questioned its viability if that trade dropped off.

Some Urban Councillors have also questioned whether civil servants could run such a mammoth amenity and make it financially viable.

"I doubt whether the Urban Services Department has the human resources and the experience to manage the park," Mr Wong said.

"It is a commercial operation in a competitive market after all."

He warned that any financial loss in future would put an extra burden on the council, which has been trying hard for a balanced budget.

The handover of the park together with the land would also pose a "land right" problem to the council, he said.

At present, the Urban Council, in principle, does not own any land in the territory.

In accepting the offer of running Ocean Park, Urban Council members earlier this month saw it as a natural complement to the council's

widespread activities in running other leisure ventures.

Some members, however, were worried about the financial aspects of the plan, and questioned whether the council had the expertise to handle it properly. They said running such a venture would require an entrepreneurial style of management with a high degree of creativity.

Urbco chairman Mr Gerry Forsgate had welcomed the proposal, however, saying it was a great compliment from the Jockey Club to the council.

Ocean Park's Water World attracts about 3,500 visitors in weekdays and double that number on Sundays. About 20 per cent of the park's visitors are from overseas.

The park has 435 permanent staff, together with 130 seasonal workers.

The park management has plans for further expansions, adding a mammoth aviary and a "history village" to its existing facilities, which include an aquarium, roller coaster, giant escalators, cable cars and various aquatic shows.