

THE Chairman of the Country Parks Board, Carlos Cheung Hon-kau, has made a call for all applications for commercial or private development of lands within the designated recreational areas to be made public.

This move for greater honesty and openness will be welcomed enthusiastically by environmentalists, animal lovers, conservation groups and those who feel government planners in the past have used outmoded rules of secrecy to aid land developers and deny the public information about what was happening in the parks' lands.

"I can't speak for the entire board, but what I would like to see is publication of details of every proposal that comes before us at the application stage," Mr Cheung said.

"These details should be made known to the public before discussions begin, not after a decision has been made."

Mr Cheung's move towards public disclosure follows a recent furore about the board's decision to approve development of a golf course at Shalotung, a project which will involve two million square feet of parkland being surrendered to developers.

He stresses deliberations went on for years before approval was given and that this step was taken only after rigorous guarantees were extracted from the developers.

He is adamant the golf course development — with those stringent conditions guaranteeing access and retention of the old Hakka village — will improve public pleasure of the parklands that stretch beyond the golf course into the Pat Sin Ranges.

One problem with the Shalotung project was that the public could not find out what was

going on. There was a blank silence from many government departments who refused all information.

As a result, suspicions were aroused. Many concerned individuals and organisations became alarmed. What could have been a beneficial development was regarded as a cynical conspiracy.

Carlos Cheung contends such worries are unnecessary and would be easily avoided if the Parks Board released full details of proposals when applications were first made.

"I will really push for the public to be told," he vowed. "This sort of secrecy is counter-productive."

"Public consultation is very important. And the public has a right to know."

His stand is as invigorating as a stiff sea breeze blowing over the unspoiled 41,320 hectares of bush land, mountain peaks and shoreline that make up the 21 country parks and three special areas which come under the auspices of the Country Parks Board.

Although only an advisory body, what the 14-strong Parks Board suggests to the Government is almost invariably followed.

The board has to come up with sound reasons if it rejects any proposal.

Mr Cheung points out that some confusion in the public mind exists because many traditional village areas which may lie within the general boundaries of designated Coun-

VIEWPOINT

try Parks have been "excised" from Parks Board control.

What this means is that when the rural areas, a full one-third of all Hongkong's land mass, was made into country parks for the benefit of the entire community, most existing villages were excluded.

So if the Wong clan, for example, in Sai Kung decide to tear down their three-century-old homes and put up Spanish villas, it is out of control of the board. The village may be within general park boundaries, but it has been surgically removed from board supervision.

IF that same Wong family, however, wanted to develop outside the village boundaries or wished to widen a road or take any other action that would affect the parklands or their use by the public, then the board would be called on to examine, report and advise.

"We don't own the land," he explains. "It's either private land or government-owned."

"But the board controls the use of the land within the boundaries, except for the excised villages."

"We have to be balanced. Progress is good, but it can be very, very destructive."

"We've got to look after the environment. People are now very conservation-minded."

At present, Mr Cheung and other board members are looking with concern at the new airport development on Lantau.

How will it affect country parks on the big island? In par-

ticular, will it sprawl over the 70 kilometre-long Lantau Trail? They do not know but are keeping a close eye on development proposals, especially those that may affect the southern coast which is designated a protected area.

Carlos Cheung, a bluff, amiable structural and civil engineer with a sense of humour as well as history, is no stranger to the rural areas which as chairman of the Country Parks Board he is in charge of safeguarding.

Born in Panama in 1939, he was brought back to Hongkong as a nine-year-old and grew up in the old, long-gone walled city of Tai Po.

"I'm a country boy," he said with a laugh. He still lives in the New Territories and enjoys long, solitary walks in the hills.

When he came to Hongkong as a boy, he spoke only Spanish. He had to learn Hakka to talk to neighbours and boyhood friends with whom he swam and fished in the clean waters of the Lam Tsuen River.

"We used to eat the fish we caught there," he reflects. "I wouldn't do that now," he adds swiftly, pointing to the appalling pollution that has taken sad toll of that stream.

He also learned Cantonese and then English which was honed during a decade of education in America where he studied engineering at the University of California at Berkeley.

Looking back on his boyhood, Carlos Cheung feels a pang. But he's a realist: "We've got to have progress."

Towering high-rise public housing blocks now march along the concreted river banks where he splashed as a boy. But they have replaced some of the most dreadful slums in Asia.

That boyhood gave him an appreciation of old temples, monuments and buildings as

A fresh view on country parks

SOUTH CHINA MORNING POST
14 OCT 1991

Not all the major development plans submitted to the Parks Board are approved, he hastens to point out. Cases in point include China Light and Power proposals for coal-burning power stations. The company suggested sites on Lantau and at Sai Kung. The board knocked back both ideas and they have not gone ahead.

On the other hand, use of a High Island site for a Vietnamese camp was given the green light.

"I would like to see public input on every major project that comes before us," Carlos Cheung maintains.

well as a love of the countryside. This is reflected in the impressive roll of voluntary service he has notched up on organisations connected with rural life.

He is at present an appointed Member of the Regional Council. Over the years, he has served on the old Tai Po Advisory Board (predecessor of the Tai Po District Board), the Antiquities and Monuments Board, the Town Planning Board and the Housing Authority.

He first sat on the Country Parks Board in 1984 and has been chairman since 1989.