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\$2.5m spent on on-line²²⁻⁶ poll register system

A TOTAL of \$2.5 million was spent in the last district board elections to improve the computerised electoral register system, while another \$1 million will be needed for the first indirect elections to the Legislative Council this September.

The Data Processing Manager, Mr Stephen Lau, said the expenses were necessary to help the storage of expanded information and memory and print-out facilities with the coming on stream in 1981 of the electoral register system.

Last week's DB elections, which cost \$2.5 million to the computer agency, works out at \$1.30 to \$1.50 per voter.

Lau said every time there is an increase in the volume of voters the computer system has to be enhanced by expanding the system's information capacity.

In 1981, there were only

400,000 voters, which cost the Government Data Processing Agency \$827,000. From 1981 to last year, the number of voters increased to 1.4 million, costing a total of \$2.5 million.

Lau said that in the next registration cycle in September, the target voters would be 2.2 million and a sum of \$1 million more would be needed by then.

The Chief Secretary, Sir Philip Haddon-Cave, praised the DPA and the Electoral Services Division for a job well done in the DB elections.

He cited that only \$2.5 million was spent for electoral registration compared with \$3 million for publicity.

Lau also told the Finance Committee that it was "technically" possible to work out the same electoral register system on computers for functional constituencies.

By September, nine functional constituencies will return 12 members to the Legislative Council.

But Lau said the system needed to be worked out "right down to its nuts and bolts" before it could be finalised.

Nominated members also suggested that the DPA review its lease with International Computers Ltd (ICL), which provides the mainframe for the government, as to the comprehensiveness of its software programme.

Lau, however, said the DPA got a "very good bargain" when it decided to lease from ICL on a five-year basis, with the lease expiring in 1989.

Earlier, the Commissioner for Census and Statistics, Mr C.C. Greenfield, said there would be some savings in converting software packages from IBM to ICL.

Two departments on the mat for repair work contracts

TWO government departments got a grilling from the Finance Committee's nominated members yesterday for contracting out maintenance and repair work instead of using in-house facilities.

Mr Hu Fu-kua asked about the cost-effectiveness of engaging external professional services in the Building Development Department (BDD) and the Electrical and Mechanical Services Department (EMSD).

The BDD is budgetting \$25.4 million for the next fiscal year, most of which will be used to engage professional assistance to undertake work which cannot be carried out in-house because of staff shortage.

The EMS will be spending \$29.3 million for contract maintenance of government vehicles, electronic equipment, sewerage treatment plants, incinerators and air-

conditioning plants.

In addition, there is a \$150 million item in the BDD budget for contract maintenance of government buildings and the Kaitak Airport buildings and for emergency repair works to government properties damaged by natural disasters.

Building Development's director, Mr Chau Cham-son said it was difficult to compare the cost-effectiveness of contracting out services, or undertaking it through in-house staff.

He said contract services for building works did not include feasibility studies and post-contract services, which were normally done in-house.

He said the decision to contract out would depend on the project, its scope and need for such services.

Mr Stephen Cheong then suggested that more in-house

projects should be done because of the additional services provided.

Chau said the Architectural Office usually needed outside experts because of the lack of expertise and available staff internally.

He assured Cheong that he was satisfied that the decision for contract work was being vetted "very tightly."

The EMSD director, Mr Graham Osborne, said it was not easy to provide the cost-effectiveness of services "in a formal one-line fashion."

He said the decision to contract out services was the prerogative of government departments because the EMSD was only a service department.

Osborne said it would be twice more expensive to contract out services. But there were exemptions, such as in maintaining more sophisticated hospital equipment.