

CONTROLLING OFFICER'S REPLY

FHB(FE)215

(Question Serial No. 1631)

Head: (49) Food and Environmental Hygiene Department

Subhead (No. & title): (-) Not specified

Programme: (2) Environmental Hygiene and Related Services

Controlling Officer: Director of Food and Environmental Hygiene (Miss Vivian LAU)

Director of Bureau: Secretary for Food and Health

Question:

It is stated in Programme (2) that support will be given to the Private Columbaria Licensing Board in processing applications for a licence or other specified instruments for operating a private columbarium. Since the implementation of the Private Columbaria Ordinance in 2017, only one application has been approved. Please advise this Committee of the following:

- (1) What are the staff establishment and expenditure of the Private Columbaria Affairs Office? Is there any assessment of whether the existing manpower can cope with the anticipated workload? In 2019-20, what are the manpower and expenditure earmarked for supporting the work of the Licensing Board?
- (2) As at March 2019, how many applications for a licence in respect of private columbaria have been received? What is the progress of the vetting of the licence applications? What is the estimated time required for completing the vetting work for all applications?
- (3) In light of the strong public demand for niches provided by private columbaria, will the vetting process be expedited to clear the huge backlog of licence applications?

Asked by: Hon TSE Wai-chun, Paul (LegCo internal reference no.: 29)

Reply:

- (1) When the Private Columbaria Ordinance (Cap. 630) (the Ordinance) came into effect on 30 June 2017, the Private Columbaria Affairs Office (PCAO) had about 50 staff members. The Food and Environmental Hygiene Department (the Department) keeps in view the manpower requirement of the PCAO and has provided it with additional manpower resources to cope with its workload. The PCAO will have about 60 staff members in 2019-20 and the estimated expenditure is \$76.2 million.

(2&3) From the commencement of the Ordinance to 18 March 2019, the Private Columbaria Licensing Board (the Licensing Board) had received a total of 360 applications for specified instruments from 145 private columbaria. A number of columbaria have withdrawn their applications. The Licensing Board approved 2 licence applications in January and March 2019. In addition, the Licensing Board agreed in principle in February 2019 that another application basically met the requirements for a licence (except for the land-related ones), and will make its final decision after the applicant has complied with the land-related requirements.

As at 18 March 2019, the Licensing Board was processing 333 applications for specified instruments submitted by 136 private columbaria, 106 of which submitted applications for a licence.

While the Licensing Board has been striving to process the applications for specified instruments as quickly as possible, the progress depends to a large extent on whether the applicants had complied with the requirements stipulated in the Ordinance and those specified by the Licensing Board at the time when they submitted the applications, and whether all the required documents and information have been furnished. At present, most columbaria have yet been able to submit all the required supporting documents and information. The PCAO and/or relevant departments have to ask quite a number of them to provide clarifications or supplementary information. The PCAO will continue to maintain close liaison with the relevant departments and the applicants in order to complete the vetting work and submit the applications to the Licensing Board for decision as soon as possible.

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