

LCQ2: East Rail Line

Following is a question by the Hon Chan Chun-ying and a reply by the Secretary for Transport and Housing, Mr Frank Chan Fan, in the Legislative Council today (November 21):

Question:

It has been over a century since the Hong Kong section of the Kowloon-Canton Railway, the predecessor of the East Rail Line (ERL), came into existence. In recent years, incidents of disruptions of train service of ERL have happened from time to time. Earlier on, an overhead power line of ERL was damaged during the onslaught of super typhoon Mangkhut in Hong Kong causing a train service disruption lasting nearly one day. Some members of the public have pointed out that ERL, which is a major means of transport to and from New Territories East, Kowloon and the Mainland, has become outdated, and its train compartments are also very crowded during peak hours. In this connection, will the Government inform this Council:

(1) whether it knows the number of incidents of delay of train service of ERL lasting over one hour in the last decade and their causes and, among such incidents, the percentage of those caused by equipment failure;

(2) whether it knows how the current passenger throughput of ERL during peak hours compares with the design capacity; if ERL is overloaded, of the authorities' proposals to divert the passengers; and

(3) whether it will consider expeditiously embarking on a study on the feasibility to construct, as a replacement of ERL, an entirely new express rail which is covered or underground; if so, of the details; if not, the reasons for that?

Reply:

President,

The MTR Corporation Limited (MTRCL) is committed to providing safe, reliable and smooth railway services for its passengers amounting to over 5.3 million daily. To ensure that the railway system and equipment are kept in good working order, the MTRCL has put in place a comprehensive and stringent asset management and maintenance mechanism. For example, trains, signalling system, power supply system and railway tracks are regularly maintained and renewed to internationally recognised high standard. Moreover, the MTRCL invests substantial resources annually in enhancing, revitalising and maintaining its railway assets and infrastructural facilities to maintain high quality of railway service. In 2017, the MTRCL has invested over \$8 billion in upgrading and maintaining its railway assets, which is around 44 per cent of the total revenue of around \$18 billion of Hong Kong transport operations. Relevant investment in the previous three years (2014-2016) also amounted to around \$6-8 billion each year.

As the Hon Chan Chun-ying mentioned, the East Rail Line (ERL), formerly known as the Kowloon-Canton Railway, has served Hong Kong people for over a century. To keep up with the times, the ERL has been improving its railway system. The stations along the line had undergone redevelopment or relocation, and the trains and infrastructural facilities including signalling and track equipment had also been renewed to tie in with the modernisation programme. For example, the MTRCL integrated the Train Operations Center in Fo Tan which managed train operations of ERL and Ma On Shan Line to the Operations Control Center in Tsing Yi in 2013, in order to enhance the efficiency of the overall railway network. Since 2014, the MTRCL has implemented station improvement work in various ERL stations, including adding entrances and exits, integrating station lobby, installing traction lifts etc., to create a more convenient and comfortable environment for passengers. As of today, the ERL is about 42 kilometres in length with 14 stations, carrying around 1 million passenger trips daily on average. Indeed, the ERL bore witness to the rapid development of Hong Kong, and in particular, the new towns in North and East New Territories. In view of the construction of the Shatin to Central Link (SCL), a major enhancement project are being undertaken for the signalling system, trains and platform facilities of the ERL with the objective of providing safe, reliable and comfortable services to the public.

My reply to the Hon Chan Chun-ying's question is as follows:

(1) On the whole, the ERL has been operating smoothly. In the past decade (from 2009 to September this year), there were 11 cases of suspension of train service for over one hour due to incidents on the ERL. Among these, four cases were caused by factors within MTRCL's control (viz. equipment failure or human factors), and seven cases were due to causes outside MTRCL's control (viz. passengers' behaviours or external factors such as bad weather). Even in case of bad weather (e.g. when tropical cyclone signal number 9 or above is in force) necessitating the suspension of train service, the MTRCL will immediately check the condition when the weather has changed and clear obstructions and repair damaged equipment where necessary. All these efforts are made with the aim of restoring train services as soon as practicable when weather permits. After each of such incident caused by equipment failure, the monitoring department would ask the MTRCL to look into the cause of the incident and review the contingency plan in the light of the experience gained and introduce measures to avoid recurrence.

(2) As regards the current passenger throughput of the ERL, the patronage per hour per direction during the morning peak hours for the critical link (i.e. Tai Wai to Kowloon Tong) in 2017 was 57 800 passenger trips, and the loading was 67 per cent or 94 per cent on the basis of a density of six or four persons (standing) per square metre respectively. Train service has been able to meet passenger needs. The ERL is now replacing the signalling system which will enable it to increase the frequency of its service from a maximum average of one train every three minutes at present to every two minutes. The MTRCL will closely monitor the loading of the ERL, including the loading upon the commissioning of the SCL, which will form the North South Corridor with the ERL. The Corporation will review and study proposals in this regard in a

timely manner. Specifically, to cope with demand generated by future patronage, the Corporation may consider feasible measures such as increasing train frequency as far as possible under the new signalling system, arranging short-haul trips to run between busy stations, easing passenger flow through station management measures, and offering fare concessions to alleviate the heavy loading of trains during the peak periods.

(3) The Transport and Housing Bureau plans to take forward the Strategic Studies on Railways and Major Roads beyond 2030 (RMR2030+ Studies) on the conceptual spatial requirements to be firmed up under the Hong Kong 2030+: Towards a Planning Vision and Strategy Transcending 2030 (Hong Kong 2030+ Study), which is being conducted by the Development Bureau and the Planning Department. Based on the latest planning information, including cross-boundary transport data, RMR2030+ Studies will examine the demand and supply of the transport infrastructure, including railways and major roads, in Hong Kong between 2031 and 2041, and study the loading of the heavy rails in the Northwest New Territories beyond 2030.

We will consider the planning studies and the recommended strategic transport corridors in relation to the Lantau Tomorrow Vision, as well as look into the layout of the proposed railway and major road infrastructure with regard to the transport infrastructure required for the longer-term strategic growth areas of Hong Kong 2030+ Study (such as the New Territories North), to ensure that the planning of large scale transport infrastructure can meet the needs of the overall long-term land use developments of Hong Kong. RMR2030+ Studies will also examine the impact of the proposed transport infrastructure on the existing transport network (including the ERL) and formulate corresponding strategies. The Legislative Council Panel on Transport expressed support for the above studies in June 2017. Since Hong Kong 2030+ Study has not yet been completed, we will seek funding approval in due course for implementing RMR2030+ Studies.