

Town planners to impose controls on Po Toi Island developments

Despite decision, town planners face court challenge from developers over island project

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Olga Wong and Johnny Tam



Niches have been developed at Po Toi Island. Photo: David Wong

The Town Planning Board upheld its decision to impose controls on any development on Po Toi Island yesterday, but now faces a legal challenge from developers who are building a memorial garden there.

Splendid Resources and Sky Pacific, which have planned 4,400 funeral urn niches in a columbarium, said the hearing process was unfair.

"We wrote to the board four times before the hearing, asking for a deferral, but we were ignored," Splendid Resources spokesman Mak Chi-yeung said. "Many of the public submissions accepted by the board lack personal details. People did not provide their full names or contact details, which violates the town planning rules."

He said the company would take legal action contesting the board's decision.

Mak was referring to yesterday's hearing, at which board members examined public views on the move to impose a development permission area plan covering more than 90 per cent of the island. This would mean nearly all developments must obtain prior board approval.

The decision was welcomed by Eddie Tse Sai-kit, convenor of a concern group that focuses on illegal columbariums.

Po Toi Island is home to several rare butterflies and the endangered Romer's tree frog, and has rock carvings that are 3,500 years old.

But since last December, the columbarium developer has been installing memorial stones on the island. Two thousand niches have already been developed as part of the memorial garden. This triggered strong opposition from green groups and the concern group opposing illegal columbariums.

The developers said a government consultation paper on regulating private columbarium facilities, released in July 2010, made them believe that the memorial garden was legal.

But the Lands Department said the developer breached land leases and it may still repossess the site.

The department asked the developers to remove the concrete slabs on the site by February 28, but they did not comply with the order and filed a request with the Court of First Instance to clarify details of the breaches.

The island's indigenous residents said they were against a columbarium for fear that it may disturb their lifestyle, but some said they hoped any development would bring better electricity and water supply.

Meanwhile, the Development Bureau identified seven more private columbariums and added them to its list of 74 private columbariums with land lease and planning rules breaches for public reference.

Five are in Hung Hom, one is in Fanling and one in Tuen Mun.

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