

Overpass review reveals overpricing

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A closer look at more than 500 purchase plans from the Xinsheng Overpass construction project found that besides the flowers and plants, the contractor also overcharged at least seven other purchase plans, the Taipei City Government said yesterday, promising to check the project's budget thoroughly.

The city government revealed the latest findings on the project after Taipei Mayor Hau Lung-bin (郝龍斌) yesterday presided over the first meeting of a task force formed on Friday to investigate if any corruption was involved in the purchase plans for the overpass and the Taipei International Flora Exposition.

A report presented by Taipei City's Department of Government Ethics during the meeting said that the contractor, Join Engineering Consultants, failed to go through a price comparison procedure before making purchase plans for bridge construction, road construction, drainage systems, lighting systems, traffic safety infrastructure, water sprinkler systems and labor safety measures.

As a result, the city government paid up to 12 times the market price for project materials.

Hau yesterday acknowledged the city government's failure to notice the price differentials earlier and promised to take action against any officials found to have taken bribes from the contractor.

"The city government will face up to the challenges over the project candidly ... The initial investigation showed that the civil servants who handled the project were seriously negligent, and we will continue to find out whether the incident was merely the result of oversight or if any illegal acts were involved," he told a press conference at Taipei City Hall.

Hau also promised there would be "no limits" to the investigation.

City officials and members of Hau's administration will cooperate with the investigation and a final report is due in two weeks.

Hau's administration has stepped up efforts to address the dispute over the purchase plans and budgets for the overpass and the expo after the matter turned into the center of discussion on talk shows over the past few days.

Last week several Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) Taipei City councilors began to ask questions about the prices of the flowers and plants purchased for the bridge. Documents obtained from the New Construction Department at the city's Bureau of Public Works showed that in one case, the contractor billed the city government more than NT\$120,000 (US\$3,748) for planting 400 Wedelia plants underneath the Xinsheng Overpass. The tiny yellow flower normally retails for NT\$9. The company also billed the city government more than NT\$425 each for bulbs of an evergreen vine that the city's parks department normally buys for about NT\$100.

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The city government failed to clarify the issue and take action until Thursday when it punished the responsible officials and launched an investigation into the purchase plans. Meanwhile on Thursday, DPP Taipei City councilors also filed a lawsuit against Hau, accusing him of negligence.

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