

Planners snub private sector on green belt

Study provides ammunition for opponents of government plans to rezone edge-of-town land and construct thousands of new flats

Planners have shot down more than 80 per cent of applications from private companies to rezone green belt land for housing over the past 18 years, often for fear of setting an “undesirable precedent”, a study shows.

The findings add fuel to green groups’ opposition to government plans to turn 150 hectares of green belt over for housing – a key plank of its ambitious target of adding 480,000 new homes by 2015. Researchers behind the study urged the Town Planning Board to ensure it treated government applications the same way it did those from developers.

The Planning Department’s applications to rezone 70 such sites are at a critical stage, as the board vets the first batch.

The board has so far approved 11 and vetoed three government applications. That means some 27 hectares of land will be available to provide 16,000 flats.

But the government suffered its first setback last month, when the board struck down rezoning proposals for two sites in Tai Po.

The government says the green sites it wants developed have little conservation value, though some board members have pointed out that that was never the green belt’s purpose. Instead it was intended to stop urban sprawl and set a boundary between town and country.

Using public data, Chinese University’s Centre for Environmental Policy and Resource Management examined 37 private applications to rezone green belt sites for flats, made between 1997 and last year. The board rejected 30.

The study was commissioned by the owners’ committee of Dynasty Heights in Shek Kip Mei, which is opposing a government rezoning plan for a nearby site.

Among the 30 rejections, the board cited fear of setting an “undesirable precedent” in 24. Other oft-cited factors included insufficient information from applicants, in 19 cases, and a contradiction with green belt planning intentions, in 15. Some were turned down because of potential adverse impact on the landscape or environment. Planners can give multiple grounds

for rejecting an application.

Dr Joanna Lee Wai-ying, who led the study, said: “The board has been a strict gatekeeper over the years and would not lightly allow development plans on green belt sites. If the government itself is doing this, it appears [it is] holding a different standard.” She warned that a change of policy could offer justification for developers to make similar requests to encroach on green belt land.

Dr Tony Leung Ka-tung, chairman of **the Institute of Surveyors**’ planning and development division, believed developers would still struggle to secure rezoning on green belt sites.

“For each application, the developer has to convince the board that it meets requirements on sewerage, drainage, traffic, environment and other matters. I don’t think the board will relax its standards.”

He said he supported the government’s plan because increasing land supply was key to cooling property prices.