

HARBOUR PROTECTION

Get off the road to destruction

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We have a government that says it wants to preserve Victoria Harbour. Yet, it does not want to sacrifice the road-building that eats away at the harbour.

Our political leaders refuse to treat the Central-Wan Chai harbourfront as one continuous stretch of waterfront when it presents development plans. It will not acknowledge the large tracts of reclaimed land that could be sold in the future. It tries to justify the reclamation solely on the basis of a bypass to ease traffic congestion.

The government refuses to commission studies for no-reclamation or minimal reclamation options for the Central-Wan Chai bypass, even when community groups have presented viable alternatives.

The administration at one point drew up three "options" for the Wan Chai waterfront via the advisory body, the Harbourfront Enhancement Committee (HEC). They had to be withdrawn, not only because the way it was done created the impression the committee was being used as a government stooge. But, further, because questions arose as to whether the brief to consultants had explicitly required them to observe the presumption against reclamation, as set out in law.

In response to that embarrassing episode, Secretary for Housing, Planning and Lands Michael Suen Ming-yeung told the public the bypass was needed because by 2011, it could take up to 45 minutes to travel from Central to Causeway Bay during rush hours - a journey that takes 15 minutes today. Mr Suen said the bypass would shorten the journey to a mere five minutes, and that this was an "urgent" matter for "Asia's world city".

The reclamation and the road will of course cost many billions for the convenience of a five-minute drive during peak hours. Mr Suen claims that there is no other way. As for electronic road pricing (ERP), he claims Hong Kong first needs to build the bypass so that drivers have an alternative. The government refuses to release a full consultancy report on ERP completed several years ago.

There is no reason why Hong Kong cannot use a "no-new road" option as a thinking framework for considering how to improve traffic flow. But, unfortunately, it does not want to put itself into such a thinking mode, because it has become so used to building roads.

Because of this entrenched attitude, other benefits from a "no-new road" option - such as air quality improvements and aesthetic benefits - are never considered. Indeed, the government seeks to weaken the Protection of the Harbour Ordinance and the Court of Final Appeal judgment by saying traffic easing is an "overriding public need".

Mr Suen says the public should decide whether it wants the bypass or face congestion - as if they were the only options. Many will be taken in by this simplistic positioning by the government. People seeking to demand alternatives will be painted as unreasonable and impractical. The government is even blocking the Society for Protection of the Harbour's submission to the Town Planning Board on alternative traffic and development plans for Central, with implications for Wan Chai.

So, road building continues to be serious business in Hong Kong. In all this, Secretary for Environment, Transport and Works Sarah Liao Sau-tung is nowhere to be seen. The charge to reclaim the harbour and build roads is being led by Mr Suen, even though transport and public works come under the purview of Ms Liao.

The reason why environment and transport are in the same bureau stems from the recognition that the two are intimately linked. So, why is Ms Liao always silent?

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