

Integrated planning for a world class harbour

Hong Kong's harbour-fronts suffer from massive traffic corridors and the acute shortage of land. And no new land will be added as the public is clearly against reclamation. To enhance our harbour-fronts and to create a vibrant harbour requires the re-engineering of infrastructure, the re-provisioning of utilities and the rezoning of the remaining available land. Harbour-front enhancement means a stop to adding new infrastructure and utilities and a halt to land sales along the harbour-front. Policy changes are needed to manage the demand for roads, to find alternative sources for land sales revenue and to identify funding and funding mechanisms for harbour-front enhancement projects.

Michael Suen, our Secretary for Housing, Planning and Lands, has to-date however failed to put forward a pro-active policy for retaining the final plots of land around our harbour for enhancement. Harbour-front land has been - or is earmarked to be - sold for development or used for infrastructure and utilities. Projects, including several identified by the Administration in the 2003 Harbour Plan Study, are no longer feasible.

What is more, he has failed to put forward policy initiatives aimed at controlling lands development in Hong Kong within the capacity constraints of our existing land resources and transport network around the harbour. Transport studies demonstrate that new and additional roads will be needed to cope with future demand as a result of planned and expected new developments.

This point was made blatantly clear when Sarah Liao's Environment, Transport and Works Bureau released plans for Route 4 including the construction of an 'Island Eastern Corridor' in the Western district which will consume existing harbour-front land and new reclamations. This despite earlier claims that Wanchai and Kai Tak were the final two reclamations projects on the Administration's wish-list for Victoria Harbour.

In the meantime, Sarah Liao has made little apparent progress with the development and implementation of traffic demand management policies such as road pricing, rationalization of bus routes and traffic interchanges, tunnel pricing adjustments, loading/unloading restrictions, or a time schedule for the roll out of new rail lines to alleviate the pressure on our harbour-fronts. The lack of urgency is surprising given that all such reasonable alternatives for road building will have to be reviewed before the Central Wanchai Bypass can go ahead and pass an overriding public needs test for possible reclamation.

Government officials are duty bound to act in accordance with the Protection of the Harbour Ordinance and related Court of Final Appeal judgment. A very real and reasonable alternative is for Michael Suen and Sarah Liao to develop and implement integrated land development and transport policy initiatives aimed at avoiding the further deterioration of our harbour-fronts. Without actively putting these in place today, it is hard to see how any public overriding needs test for reclamation can be passed in the future, let alone how the Hong Kong Government will make good on its pledge to enhance our harbour-fronts.

The process and institutions for managing and financing the harbour-fronts has become a pressing issue. No funding or funding mechanisms have been identified for harbour-front enhancement. Clearly, the West Kowloon developer-led model is not advisable for redevelopment of our harbour-fronts. Other methods such as the use of a Capital Reserve Fund, a land development corporation or a harbour authority are needed. To resolve the shortcomings of the Harbour-front Enhancement Committee (HEC) and to ensure that the HEC can effectively advise the Government and organize the public participation exercises for the urban and marine plans for Victoria Harbour, it will need an independent secretariat and funds for research and consultation programs. As a counterpart for the HEC, the Government must establish an internal 'Harbour-front Enhancement Taskforce' (like the taskforces for West Kowloon and Lantau), to coordinate and integrate its efforts for master planning a sustainable world class harbour.

Paul Zimmerman is convenor of Designing Hong Kong Harbour District, principal of The Experience Group, a policy and strategy consultancy, and executive director of MF Jebsen International.