

Legislative Council Panel on Development

Written submission on “The Government’s strategy to enhance land supply through reclamation outside Victoria Harbour and rock cavern development”

Submission by Lam Siu Lo Andrew on personal capacity

When I take a long term view, my position is simple. I support all kinds of means that can sustain land supply in Hong Kong, including reclamation and rock cavern development. I also support the idea of building a land bank that allows the administration to respond to various demands promptly. Unless there is a general understanding that we should start planning for decline; if not, the need for continuous supply of developable land is beyond debate. The matter is then about what for, where and when.

We may spend endless time on arguing when there will be demand and what would be the best use for the land to be produced, but I cannot see the rationale behind holding back study on any forms of land supply measures and their implications on site specific basis. Findings of initial planning study can facilitate more thorough discussion on the details that cannot be addressed at a conceptual level. Leaving any stone unturned will only lead to unnecessary prolongation on the debate we went through for the past decades. Planning will not hurt! Planning with “ing” tells the fact that it is a continuous and robust process. A plan produced at the end of a planning process can be seen as a milestone, not necessarily an ultimate blueprint. After all, it is a matter of fact that we dropped so many plans we prepared in the past.

So I would say: “Try all means, new and old. Study their strengths and weaknesses. But there is no need to commit at this point in time.”

Any initiative on new land supply will inevitably impact on one kind of habitat or other. Be it on our natural, social or economic environment, there will be associated costs in both quantitative and qualitative terms. I do not think there is any need to elaborate on the problem of “NIMBY”; i.e. the mentality of “not in my back yard”. It is natural for a pluralistic society like Hong Kong to have highly diversified views, all well grounded and mostly with good intention perhaps.

If I were to take a short-term view, I can fully appreciate the tendency to rank the easier options higher. Voice of objection has to be delivered through our own language and channel whether it stands for the right of other species, our neighbours or our future generations. The nearer to the source, the voice would be louder. In my view, reclamation and rock cavern development are relatively less socially controversial at the stage of implementation amongst other means of land supply.

Arguing for that, I would suggest we should concentrate our effort on a larger tract of reclamation with least environmental impact rather than taking a long list of small scale reclamation projects. One consideration is that the social tension created by near-shore reclamation will be great; hence the political feasibility of implementing many small to medium size reclamation projects within a short period of time is doubtful given its multiplied effect.

The other reason is a strategic planning concept that I would like to put forward. Scattered open storage uses of various nature have long been a major planning issue hindering the rational development of our rural area, in both environmental and economic terms. There are almost 5 square kilometers of planned open storage uses, not to mention the unauthorized ones. Can a well-serviced reclamation serve the purpose of relocating these uses to one location which is cost effective for the operators and environmentally more manageable for the community? At the same time, the restrained environmental improvement and development potential in our rural area be released?

Switching back to my strategic thinking, it is too obvious that the some 50 percent of our territory saved for conservation purpose is indeed our social pride which can hardly be converted. Unfortunately, traffic and environmental problems associated with high density development already led to challenges on our efficient land use model. And there is a lack of development focus in our New Territories which can serve as a catalyst to decentralize our urban activities crowded around our harbour shore for decades. Is there any good enough reason for us to refuse to accept the fact that the economic and social footprint of our population is moving north rather than south? Any good strategic reason to reserve our less developed area in the New Territories while pushing for reclamation projects on our southern waters at the same time?

We might have prepared too many strategic plans, but I would submit that we need another one to critically review our land use development pattern and model in consideration of the latest factors put forward by the administration or others. Planning and development in the absence of clear population, social and economic development policy will only tie us down to a never-ending fire-fighting mode of operation!

As a final remark, I maintain the view that we should leave all options open at the planning stage. The execution of any option should however be put under a strategic implementation framework which will prioritize the actions required in view of the latest social aspirations, policies and trends. Such framework should provide clear path that leads to short and medium term actions as well as guidance for long term actions that require periodical review.

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