

Panel on Development

Special meeting on Saturday, 10 March 2012, at 9:00 am

The Government's strategy to enhance land supply through reclamation outside Victoria Harbour and rock cavern development

- K.C. LEE (a Young Engineer)

I attended the public engagement forum on the Government's strategy to enhance land supply on 4 February 2012. I am writing to express my views on this topical subject in particular the issues regarding land supply through reclamation outside Victoria Harbour. I can see that the public do not well understand the important rationales and critical issues behind reclamation.

Sustainable development is about development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs. I believe that I am in the most relevant "generation" to talk about sustainable land use. As an engineer, I possess the relevant knowledge to judge the arguments for and against the topic from a technical perspective. As a young professional at the age of 30s, I do want to speak out because I do not want to blindly rely on others to determine the future HK's skyscrapers. Even if my views are not well accepted today, I will not be regretful and lay the blame on others ten or twenty years later.

I still remember the following statement in the social science subject (社會科) during my primary school study: <香港地少人多,土地不夠應用,有關部門採取移山填海的措施,增闢土地>. Unexpectedly, it is not the principal practice we are now adopting to increase the supply of land.

Reclamation now becomes a sensitive word to many HK people. The Court of Final Appeal's Judgment in 2004 in effect affected all reclamation proposals by the Government. The judicial review has almost brought all reclamation a halt in the territory.

The government in its enhancing land supply strategy identified six modes to increase land supply. They include rezoning, redevelopment, land resumption, rock cavern development, re-use of ex-quarry sites and reclamation. The land formed by rezoning, redevelopment and land resumption is limited in scale, time-consuming and expensive. These options are often constrained by the rising public concerns on heritage conservation and compensation disputes. Against these constraints, we could hardly find any land so obtained could be successfully used for non-commercial purpose and large-scale planning and development. The option of land formed by reusing ex-quarry sites and rock cavern development is in its infancy, with only few

examples for a comprehensive study. Similarly, it is expected that the amount of land so obtained when talking about large-scale land supply is negligible. While each of the land options should be well considered after detailed study, among these modes of land supply, I believe only reclamation a sustainable land supply option, which could provide a flexible and sufficiently large supply of land. It is the only option that could be capable of creating reserve of land to cater for large-scale infrastructure and economic development. Reclamation has been an important source of creating sable land in Hong Kong for more than a century, before the judicial review in 2004.

There is understandable public concern about the impact of reclamation to the marine life. One point that I would like to highlight is that we should not ban all reclamation in Hong Kong solely on environmental ground. I do not agree to reclamation within the Victoria Harbour, but we should open the option to locations "Outside Victoria Harbour". In fact, engineers and other professionals have contributed much towards developing modern ways for reclamation. Nowadays engineering technology has been advanced to reduce environmental impact to the aquatic life. There are proven cases that show removal and disposal of marine deposit from the seabed can be minimised by adopting non-dredging methods. Eco-shoreline can also be created to restore the ecology affected.

A balance must be struck between infrastructure development and environmental protection. It is about give and take. If we take something from the environment, we need to give something back to the environment. The point is how we address concerns over the environmental threat, particularly to aquatic life. What the Government should do is not to stop all reclamation but to avoid reclamation at ecologically important locations and should keep the extent of reclamation in any area to the minimum. The Government should explain the public how aquatic life, like dolphins, will be affected and what mitigation measures will be taken to protect the endangered creatures. Instead of stressing the economic benefits, the environmental costs should be well spelt out and addressed by suitable means.

Another controversy surrounding the public is how the reclaimed land is going to be used. The community is asking for a blueprint from the Government regarding the intended use of the reclaimed land before deciding whether they support reclamation. On the other hand, for a sustainable development of the territory, I consider that there is a need to build up a "land bank" via ways such as reclamation to meet further needs. The practice currently adopting in Singapore is a very good example to HK with respect to land reserve with no planned land use at the time of reclamation. The

Government ought to assure the public that private residential development will not be the only land use on the drawing board. Other non-commercial uses, in particular, recreational and institutional uses should be highlighted. The current publicity campaigns mounted by the Government should therefore be stepped up to increase awareness of the importance of sustainable land supply among our citizens. The Government should also widely consult the stakeholders before choosing any locations for reclamation.

Reusing the public fill for reclamation is an added advantage when choosing reclamation to enhance land supply strategy. I have been involved in handling construction and demolition wastes arising from my projects for years. Existing landfill sites are expected to be full in less than 10 years' time, there is a pressing need to find a solution to allow sustainable disposal of surplus public fill.

New landfill sites must be identified. However, HK society has become more reluctant to having waste facilities near their neighbourhood. Despite the Government's efforts to improve the public's impression on the imminent concern of landfill expansion or new development, the not-in-my-backyard mentality would persist no matter how much effort is put into educating the public. The current arrangement to transport the public fill to Taishan city in Guangdong province for reclamation is definitely not a sustainable way to handle the public fill. In addition to creating around 328 hectares of reclaimed land in Taishan is carbon emissions of 50 tonnes daily arising from the marine transport. What we are adopting is to dispose away the public fill in other people's backyard. That says the Government should not all along rely solely on landfills to dispose of our construction and demolition wastes and alternative means must be explored. Reusing the public fill for reclamation is certainly a more sustainable choice.

Hong Kong people are rational and practical, rather than just radical and skeptical. If there are serious problems, I do think that the general public and the professionals can discuss together to find a solution. What we need is a careful planning, both town planning and ecology wise.