

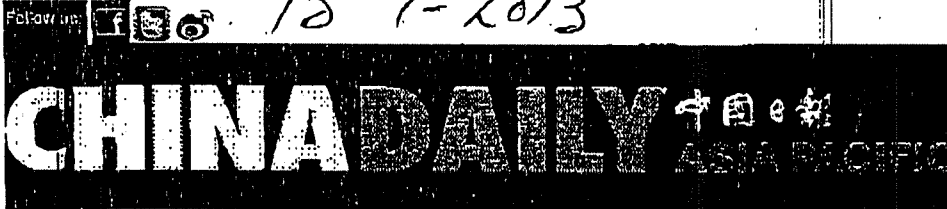
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Rethinking about strategies on northeast NT development

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A big task facing the HK government is to make better use of extremely limited land to support the social development in the region. In the last two months, controversies arose surrounding the New Development Areas in the northeast New Territories. Some protesters, possibly including some non-indigenous residents and social activists, recently spoke out vehemently against the northeast NT development scheme, which has already undergone formal urban planning procedures over a few years.

According to the proposed scheme, the government will build a new town on the 787 hectares in northeast NT, providing about 54,000 flats for more than 150,000 people. It seems possible that the government will opt for the "local residents possessing local property" policy in that area.

HK government statistics predict a population of nearly 10 million by 2050, 40 percent more than the current 7 million. The government urgently needs to review and revise the original new town planning policy to make decisions in 40-year perspectives.

Unlike the urban development of Sheung Shui and Fanling, both now highly populated or even over populated, the new town plan should supplement the societal deficiencies. Based on my observation, the current community facilities in Sheung Shui and Fanling are far from sufficient, and most residents rely on the MTR (formerly called the East Rail) for travelling to and from job locations in various districts.

There is a missing link from northeast NT to northwest NT, because the East Rail and West Rail are not interconnected in the north. People likely to live in northeast NT will be either car owners belonging to the upper middle classes, or suburban train travelers belonging to the middle and lower classes. The social problems will arise when the local residents and mainland visitors compete for the insufficient local facilities.

The traffic deficiencies can be overcome by building an interconnecting railway from Tai Po East Station, via a tunnel of 4 km to Shek Kong area (negotiating for an exchange of a runway for the Peoples' Liberation Army), connecting to the West Rail at Kam Sheung Station.

As the HK government possesses many square km of land in Shek Kong district, a large prime new town for NT can be built in the Shek Kong area. That would lead and reshape the next 40 years of integrated development of northeast NT, northwest NT, the border district, realignment of Tin Shui Wai and central north NT, and the International High Speed Railway traffic.

What the government needs to do first is to adapt and enhance the current dual-purpose High Speed Rail Station at Shek Kong into a tri-purpose facility for servicing, emergency rescue, and as a normal terminus for immigration checks. High speed trains will come from Shenzhen to West Kowloon, then to Shek Kong Terminus; and start from Shek Kong Terminus, West Kowloon, to Shenzhen. The travelers boarding at the Shek Kong Terminus would also be linked to the Kam Sheung Interchange of West-East Rail. What a marvelous rail dream, creating the most convenient multiple interlinking of International High Speed Rail lines and local rail lines!

Second, the government should seriously think about the "value" and changes needed to the current northeast NT new town scheme, in relation to the above proposed scheme from a 40-year perspective.