

Only the right Harbourfront Authority can create exemplary public spaces

Paul Zimmerman says the proposed body must have the remit to develop a waterfront for all

The government is consulting the public on the setting up of a Harbourfront Authority but both the digest and response form fail to address key concerns. These include a lack of oversight over the harbour as a whole; the lack of advisory powers over government departments; a lack of legitimacy in land allocation; bias towards commercial operations; and a loss of the public voice on the board.

Since 2004, we have called for an authority to create a world-class waterfronts. Now the shortcomings need to be resolved before the community and legislators support the proposal.

The government wants the authority to be endowed with large waterfront sites. Yet the vesting of land should be the last, not the first, tool in enhancing the sites.

To start, we need a strategic plan for Victoria Harbour and its 75km of waterfronts to justify the location of water-dependent land uses – especially the ones nobody wants: pumping stations, sewage plants, waste transfer stations, concrete plants, fish and wholesale markets, container and oil terminals, cargo areas, passenger piers, water sports centres, fuel stations, and police, customs, marine department and fire stations.

Next, the authority must develop waterfront plans for each district along Victoria Harbour, identifying land- and water-based activities and facilities which local communities want. Such district

planning processes are not new: the District Urban Renewal Forum successfully brought together professionals, the government, district councillors and the community to envisage what was required to improve the livability of Kowloon City.

To intervene, the authority must have advisory powers to guide the government to invest in new projects, and steer works at existing sites. These should include road and pavement design, pedestrian connectivity, and cycling and dog walking routes irrespective of who manages the land. It should



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steer the Food and Environmental Hygiene Department so we can eat cooked food outdoors at restaurants and kiosks along the waterfront.

The authority must advise on the funding of such projects, irrespective of which government department has responsibility.

Where a local community has decided that neither the government nor developers can deliver the desired outcomes, sites can be proposed for vesting

to the authority. With well-argued reasons and community support for proposed activities, land uses, urban design and business plans, project proposals identifying funding gaps could be readily approved by the Legislative Council.

In this way, the authority becomes a benign solution provider rather than a commercial developer. It becomes a partner of the community rather than an aloof institution. We avoid the pitfalls facing the West Kowloon Cultural District Authority. If not, government departments will soon turn their back on the new authority, adopting a attitude of: "It's not my site, not my responsibility".

Importantly, we need to drop the requirement of "financial sustainability" and a "balanced portfolio of projects". It appears that the government's finance branch is once again meddling with what was supposed to be a good idea. The bean counters consider the setting up of the authority an opportunity to reduce spending on public spaces and increase development along the waterfronts. Currently, public space is managed by the Leisure and Cultural Services Department, supported with ample annual funding of operations and ad hoc funding of projects.

The requirement to balance projects would force the authority to not just focus on social objectives but also pick waterfront sites based on commercial viability rather than community aspirations. The

focus on financial sustainability would create conflicts of interest, making it impossible for the authority to act as an adviser on harbourfront planning.

Finally, in the current organisation, members of the Harbourfront Commission nominate their own representatives. This has ensured a diversity of views, creativity and transparency. The authority must similarly pursue community appointments.

With such changes, the authority can create waterfronts which become exemplary public spaces with an abundant choice of activities for all people. Without these changes, why risk unintended consequences of yet another authority? Why not simply create a well-funded works office to implement projects identified by the Harbourfront Commission and district councils?

Either way, it's time for the government to start spending money on the world-class design and management of our waterfronts. And not just Victoria Harbour: surely residents of Aberdeen, Ap Lei Chau, Tseung Kwan O and Sha Tin have the same aspirations for their waterfronts, too.

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