

Proposal Establishment of a Harbourfront Authority Phase II Public Engagement

Views Expressed on behalf of Project Chambers

Project Chambers is a group of senior professionals, with longstanding links to Hong Kong. Their experience covers all aspects of the built environment and its supporting infrastructure. Members are committed to best practice through projects, public advocacy, and civic engagement. All members have extensive track records in the initiation, development and management of projects across a broad range of professional skills and services.

As a group we have taken a keen interest in the work of the Harbourfront Commission, and share the common visions and public aspiration to enhance Victoria Harbour through a new Harbourfront Authority.

In response to the particular views sought:

a) The Objectives

We agree with the key objectives as set out. The need for such a way forward is clearly evident to ensure delivery and implementation of a successful harbourfront and to accord with the targets set out on P15 of the Consultation Digest.

b) Definition of Victoria Harbourfront

We broadly support the definition as referring to the land area between the shoreline and the first main road. The HC currently adopts this remit for performing its advisory function. It is noted that this involves the whole of the Kai Tak and much of the Kowloon East Development Area, and West Kowloon – the latter has its own Development Authority, while the former is orchestrated through a Development Office. While an advisory and advocacy function is desirable, clear channels of communication and coordination are necessary to ensure a consistency of approach within these areas and their interface with the wider harbourfront.

Potential sites for “immediate” action and “allocation”, together with the precise role in “developing and managing” projects require detailed consideration, clear objectives and working briefs.

c) HFA’s Government and Management Functions

In terms of Board Composition, while a good balance is needed, it is crucial to have real expertise in the fields of planning, urban design, land management and economics. While local views need to be reflected this should reflect a sensible and pro-active process. An improved harbourfront that meets all the objectives set out is for the good of the city and its citizens – the excessive programme of public consultations does not in itself guarantee this. This programme of works must be pro-active, calling on best practice elsewhere, and local-based expertise. In terms of Public Availability, it is necessary to be accountable to the public while at the same time effective in terms of decision-making and the overall agenda.

We agree that the allocation of land should be conservative at the outset, and that the reclamations associated with the HK Island foreshore are a good starting point. Their prominence and importance reflects significant opportunities to meet the necessary objectives of vibrancy and diversity.

The issue of selling vested land and resumption is extremely important, and requires expert study and consideration. Our view on financial arrangements is that a large upfront endowment is necessary. This not only represents a necessary vote of confidence, but allows the formulation of bold policy. Authorities elsewhere have been through similar processes and expertise and experience should be sought. It is necessary for the formula to be self-sustaining but this does not by any means necessitate over-commercialisation. However a commercial approach is necessary to ensure a viable, enjoyable and diverse mix of uses, where open space in the form of a largely pedestrian friendly environment go hand in hand.

d) Advisory and Advocacy Function

An important balance must be made between advisory and advocacy functions, and a necessary measure of independence. A constant issue and source of concern in Hong Kong is the process-driven approach where everything is studied, everyone is consulted, but the end-product is invisible or at best a poor compromise. While we acknowledge the functions as set out, it is necessary to underline the importance of meeting the overall objectives and what are termed public aspirations – vibrancy, creativity, innovative, connective, enjoyable, diverse and sustainable. The most successful international waterfronts achieve all of these, and expertise is available. Two further aspects are important – first that the harbourfront setting is unique, and this should be an overriding issue in the aspirations for it i.e. not simply infusing the area with activities that are easily available or could just as well take place elsewhere; secondly there should be no obvious conflict between uses – in particular any actual or potential conflict or impediment between the priority of easy and stimulating pedestrian circulation should be avoided and particular care and caution should be given to any interaction of such things as cycling and dog walking (all of which can be easily carried out elsewhere) that might impede pedestrian comfort and ease of access. The harbourfront should represent people-friendly placemaking at its best.

e) Executive Functions

We support the notion that a proposed HFA should have a clearly delineated role and responsibility. While there will be necessary channels of liaison with other Government departments or organisations, the role of the HFA should not overlap. We consider it necessary for the HFA to be supported by an independent executive arm as this is vital to promote independence, attract expertise and talent, reduce the “policy silo” inherent in Government, and to adopt a holistic approach. This is crucially different from a dedicated Government Office, in that it is able to generate a relatively independent overall approach, which in effect leads from the front rather than compromises from the outset. This approach must however work in close liaison with individual Government departments and related organisations to ensure its workability and its ultimate accountability to the public.