

## **A Sustainable Solution to Harbour Reclamation**

Whilst many officials are worried about the erosion of government authority in the heated debate on harbour reclamation, the sea-change in public opinion opens up the way to a sustainable solution to protecting our harbour.

The Conservancy Association has been a long-time advocate of minimum harbour reclamation ever since the Port and Airport Development Strategy and the Metroplan were first published in 1989. Over the years numerous submissions were made to the authorities to urge for scaling-down of proposed reclamations.

Under the present system uneasy compromises were the best possible outcome at the time. Nonetheless these reclamations would have been much more destructive should the original plans went ahead without amendments.

For instance, over the last five years the Conservancy Association has been the lone voice protesting to the Highways Department, which kept pushing for the construction of a temporary road cutting across the Edinburgh Square in front of the City Hall. Should this scheme go un-objected both the Square and the Queen's Pier, which is a historical monument bearing witness to the colonial era, would have disappeared from public sight long ago. Today, both of these sites are earmarked for destruction should the Phase III reclamation in Central be allowed to go ahead.

The extent of harbour reclamation should ultimately be a reflection of public values. Does the public prefer a wider harbour to the benefits that another road link might bring? Is the public prepared to bear some health risk as opposed to reclaiming the smelly Kai Tak nullah?

Each of these proposed reclamations must be assessed against its specific context and the prevailing values of the community. The events in recent weeks showed clearly that the yardsticks against which proposed reclamations should be measured have changed for two reasons.

Firstly, the court has adopted a stricter interpretation to the Harbour Protection Ordinance than what the government presented in the past. Secondly, the public now place a much higher value on the integrity of the harbour than the potential benefits associated with any reclamation.

Both the government and the civil society alike have a duty to respond to these changes and apply the new yardsticks. After all, the fate of the harbour should not be beholden to any vested interest.

On closer examination, the real culprit of all these controversies lies with an outdated mode of governance.

The current institutions in the Transport Advisory Committee and the Town Planning Board are designed to help smooth the way for a pro-development administration rather than to allow full reflection of community values in public policies. Nearly all major reclamation proposals were justified by the need to build more roads to meet increasing traffic demand. Not surprisingly, when more reclaimed land is developed, more traffic demand will be generated. This is a self-fulfilling prophecy helping to shrink our harbour in the past few decades.

In the current standoff, we suggest a four-step process to handle the immediate crisis and to put in place a sustainable solution.

Firstly, we support a temporary freeze of all harbour reclamations regardless of the impending court ruling. After all, prevailing public values are the ultimate determinant for the future of our harbour.

Secondly, the government should appoint an independent expert panel, to be chaired by a member of the judiciary, to review the scale and the rationale of all proposed reclamations. Full public participation through public hearing procedures similar to the one applied in the review of the Strategic Sewage Disposal Scheme three years ago is essential. Frozen reclamations should either be defreezed, amended or abandoned depending on the outcome of the review.

Thirdly, the government should begin setting up a Harbour Conservation Authority. The Authority should take charge of the planning and execution of all projects in the harbour and the waterfront areas. It should be endowed with a clear mandate to break the vicious circle. A new mode of governance, using a round-table concept encompassing equal representations from the government, the private sector and the civil society should be adopted.

Fourthly, the Town Planning Board should be reformed to enhance public access to decision-making. The governance structure and membership appointment should be reviewed. The loophole that subjects transport infrastructure to less stringent scrutiny should be plugged. The procedures should be re-designed in the spirit of a partnership approach instead of an administration-led approach.

In public policy-making, goal posts do change with the shifts in community values. Crying foul is never a solution. A wiser strategy is to embrace the new paradigm.

\* \* \*

Albert Kwong Tak Lai  
Chairman, The Conservancy Association