

**Act for a Sustainable City  
Policy Address Submission  
Conservancy Association  
September 2005**

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## *Introduction*

As a great supporter of the return of Hong Kong's sovereignty to China in 1997, the Conservancy Association, since 1998, has made submissions to HKSAR Chief Executive on the occasion of his annual Policy Address. Our submissions were entitled, respectively:

<i>Year</i>	<i>Title</i>
1998	Sustainable development policy
1999	A Green Policy Address
2000	Putting sustainable development into practice
2001	Institution Building for Sustainable Development
2002	Asia's World City and a Model of Sustainable Development - Hong Kong Can Do It!!
2003	Sustainable Governance
2004	Community empowerment for sustainable development

In this submission, we would like to welcome the first Policy Address of the HKSAR's second Chief Executive by recommendation ten action items for the SAR government. They represent issues that would need to be urgently tackled if Hong Kong were to be a sustainable city. Our recommendations are all immediately actionable. We call on the Chief Executive and the SAR government to take immediate steps to implement this package of proposals.

The ten action items include the following:

1. Sustainable development: To formalize the Sustainability Impact Assessment process for government projects.
2. Local Agenda 21: Direct all District Offices to work with district councils to begin work on Local Agenda 21, first by developing a sustainability vision statement for each district.
3. Waste: Apply the "quantity-based charging" 隨量收費 principle, first to plastic bags.
4. Air pollution: Make the diesel-to-LPG scheme mandatory for light vehicles.
5. Transport: Draw up an implementation plan of Electronic Road Pricing for the urban areas.

6. Lantau: Re-planning of Lantau Island based on conservation principles.
7. Heritage: Establish an inter-departmental “Management Committee for Cultural Heritage” to oversee the conservation and adaptive re-use of the Central Police Station Compound.
8. Tree protection: Enact a tree ordinance.
9. Public empowerment: Open up the Advisory Council for the Environment, the Sustainable Development Council, the Country and Marine Parks Board, and the Transport Advisory Committee.
10. Hong Kong and Guangdong: To establish a bilateral, tripartite conference on sustainable development for Guangdong and Hong Kong.

*1. Sustainable development: To formalize the Sustainability Impact Assessment (SusIA) process, and to publish SusIA reports for government policies and major government projects.*

At present, there is a rudimentary form of Sustainability Impact Assessment (SusIA) by government departments, using the Computer Aided Sustainability Evaluation Tool (CASET). This has been described by the Association as “an inadequate tool for an incomplete task using a flawed process”.

We are not against the CASET model per se, nor the use of the CASET as a starting point to develop a proper SusIA process. But if government is serious about SusIA, much more will be required, including

- best practices on information input to be fed into the assessment system;
- a set of assessment criteria reflecting community values adequately;
- an adequate process in assessing non-technical, e.g. social, impacts;
- best practices in the actual assessment process;
- full transparency of information.

Whilst a full SusIA regime would take time to develop, we propose that the government take a small but significant step forward, namely, to formalize the SusIA process within government, and publish SusIA reports for government policies and major government projects. With the CASET experience and an administrative structure (the Sustainable Development Unit and Sustainable Development Council) already in place, what is required is a mere administrative decision.

We would hope that such SusIA would be much more elaborate than just the CASET, and that eventually the fully SusIA process will be made statutory and applicable to private sector projects as well. However, even if the current SusIA goes little beyond CASET, it is still worthwhile as a beginning, if only in encouraging information transparency of the sustainability impacts of government policies and projects.

*2. Local Agenda 21: Direct all District Offices to work with district councils to begin work on Local Agenda 21, first by developing a sustainability vision statement for each district.*

Chapter 28 of Agenda 21 has called on countries to develop and adopt Local Agenda 21 (LA21). We believe this should be done through encouraging the 18 districts of Hong Kong, to each develop its own sustainability blueprint. This has been emphasized in the Plan of Implementation of the World Summit on Sustainable Development in 2002 (para 121).

In line with best practices elsewhere, we reiterate the following features of LA21:

- (1) a participatory process with local citizens,
- (2) a consensus on the vision of a sustainable future,
- (3) addressing economic, social and ecological needs together,
- (4) the establishment of a roundtable, stakeholder group, forum or equivalent multi-sectoral community group to oversee the process,
- (5) an action plan with concrete long-term targets,
- (6) the establishment of indicators to monitor progress,
- (7) a monitoring and reporting framework.

LA21 is the best platform for the building of a harmonious society as envisioned by the Chief Executive. For LA21 engenders partnership, mutual trust and commitment among the government, the business sector, the local community and green groups.

Again, it will take time for a full LA21 to be developed. But government can take the simple first step of directing all District Offices to begin an LA21 process. A small budget should be provided for each district to effect the first two of the seven features outlined above, i.e. involvement of the local community (including business and community groups) and the District Councils, to collectively develop a vision

statement for each district. This vision statement will form the basis for developing the substantive agenda under each of the LA21.

With its emphasis on partnership, we believe the LA21 movement can indeed make a difference. Speaking from our own experience, the Conservancy Association has embarked on a sustainability project in Long Valley, in partnership with local villagers and farmers, to address the social, environmental and economic dimensions of Long Valley's conservation in an integrated manner – at a cost of only \$1.44 million from the Sustainable Development Fund. If an environmental NGO can do that, surely there will be no difficulty for the government to initiate an LA21 effort – there is plenty of energy and local innovation in the districts; all that is needed is a little facilitation from the District Offices, which surely the Chief Executive can direct.

*3. Waste: Apply the “quantity-based charging” 隨量收費 principle, first to plastic bags.*

Consistent with the polluter-pays principle, we advocate the concept of quantity-based charging” 隨量收費 for wastes. An immediate application is to levy a charge on plastic bags. This is not intended to be the start of a complex tax regime, but as the first step of a waste strategy that involves every member of the community. It is also a clear signal that government is determined to tackle the mounting waste problem.

The reason in selecting plastic bag is that it is one of the most common everyday items that is used by nearly every one, and that often can be re-used. It is easily understood, and it opens the way for more complex measures in quantity-based charging to be devised and implemented. It brings home to the community the reality that of all the environmental problems, waste is the one that literally requires everyone to put in an effort. Only when that is appreciated, can more controversial policy measures on waste disposal and treatment be acceptable to the community.

Of course, government will have to invest more resources into publicity and education about source separation, material recovery and recycling. The policy consultation and deliberation must continue through the issuing of a waste white paper. A plastic bag levy alone will not reduce waste disposal or conserve resources significantly. It can, however, help get the community focused for the wide-ranging discussion and debate which would be needed to resolve our solid waste problems.

*4. Air pollution: Make the diesel-to-LPG scheme mandatory for light vehicles.*

The community is crying out for action on air pollution. It is a very complicated problem for which there is no single solution. Many things will have to be done, both long-term and short-term, if we are to improve our air quality.

We would like to propose one tangible and practical step for the Hong Kong SAR government which can be immediately implemented, namely, to present a bill to the Legislative Council to make the diesel-to-LPG scheme mandatory for light vehicles, including light goods vans and minibuses. The scheme has been tried and tested successfully. One step forward is to make all newly imported vehicles of this type to be LPG with immediate effect. Responsible transport operators will have no difficulty in complying with the newly enacted law. The community is ready for this, and so should the government.

*5. Transport: Draw up an implementation plan of Electronic Road Pricing for the urban areas.*

Hong Kong was the first jurisdiction to have conducted a detailed study on electronic road pricing. Yet it is now falling behind, when other cities like London and Singapore have developed highly successful ERP systems.

For an advanced city like Hong Kong, sustainable transport is a very complicated yet essential public policy. It is important that we ensure commuters are able to move around; on the other hand, there is clearly an understanding that more roads breed more cars, and a perpetual road-building programme is unsustainable. The dilemma is illustrated only too well by the reclamation debate occasioned by the planned Central Wanchai Bypass.

A sustainable transport solution must therefore embody environmentally friendly alternatives, not only of the mode of transport – such as rail or trolley buses – but also in traffic management. As a market-driven traffic control device, ERP must be an integral part of a sustainable transport policy, especially for congestion-prone urban areas.

We recognize that ERP is not the be-all or end-all of transport solutions. Yet we believe we have gone well past the time of studying feasibilities. It is time now to implement ERP to the urban areas. Hence we call on the government, using the Chief Executive's policy address, to announce a decision to draw up an implementation plan for ERP.

*6. Lantau: Re-planning of Lantau based on conservation principles.*

We call on the Chief Executive to abandon the current ill-conceived Lantau Concept Plan and direct the Planning Department to revert to a conservation-based re-planning of Lantau Island, in accordance with prevailing principles in strategic and territorial planning.

Lantau is the last “wild place of Hong Kong”, even though there is already a new airport, the most polluted new town, and Disney theme park in or alongside the Island. But this “wild place” cannot be sustainable if we continue to throw in sporadic mega-developments – a logistics park, a new container port, another new town, a super-highway to Macau and Zhuhai, a golf course, another theme park, a race track, a natural gas terminal, etc.

Lantau Island is still a natural treasure of Hong Kong, but if it is destroyed, it can never be re-created. Piecemeal development projects – such as those suggested by the Lantau Concept Plan – should have no place. The key to Lantau planning is not the “sustainable development of Lantau” itself – with a hidden emphasis on “development”. Rather, Lantau plays an important part in the “sustainable development of Hong Kong” as a whole. From the point of view of Hong Kong as a whole, the strategic planning context for Lantau must be one based on conservation. The planners should see to it that there must be an agreed Conservation Plan for Lantau, *before* any further development. That must be the starting point in the re-planning, or proper planning, of Lantau.

*7. Heritage: Establish an inter-departmental “Management Committee for Cultural Heritage” to oversee the conservation and adaptive re-use of the Central Police Station Compound.*

The Conservancy Association has already submitted to the Chief Executive a report of a public engagement exercise involving 5,000 citizens on the future of the Central Police Station Compound (including Central Police Station, former Central Magistracy and Victoria Prison). Through this submission, we wish to reinforce our call for the immediate establishment of an inter-departmental “Management Committee for Cultural Heritage” to oversee the conservation and adaptive re-use of the Central Police Station complex. In other words, the current “integrated single-tender” approach by the Tourism Commission – to outsource research, planning, development and operation of the site to one successful tender – should be abandoned.

The community has expressed a clear preference for the Central Police Station Compound to become a heritage-led project, not a tourism-led project. The best international practice should be adopted, which would include three priority tasks, namely, preparation of a Statement of Cultural Significance; the formulation of a Sustainable Reuse and Conservation Plan; and an open process involving the community in the development and operation of the site. Although the Home Affairs Bureau is the “home base” for the government’s heritage policy, the task goes well beyond any single bureau, and requires a new institutional arrangement to be established.

Our proposal is to first set up a Management Committee for Cultural Heritage, with all government departments involved in heritage development taking part, with representatives from civil society and the private sector as advisers. This group should be tasked by administrative directive – and given the power by the Chief Executive – to undertake the conservation and sustainable re-use of the Central Police Station Complex. In the longer term, the goal is to enable this Management Committee to evolve into a legally-backed Management Authority for Cultural Heritage to take charge of the sustainable re-use of all significant cultural heritage. The Chief Executive now has the opportunity of starting this process right now.

#### *8. Tree protection: Enact a tree ordinance.*

The Conservancy Association strongly believes that the community of Hong Kong is ready for a new law to protect our trees.

There is urgency for an ordinance to protect trees because of

- our diminishing forests in the urban fringes and countryside;
- the dwindling number of old and valuable trees, which are part of our urban fabric and in some cases, part of our heritage;
- the recognition that trees are an important part of a “community’s ecology”, part of the neighbourhood that enhances our quality of life;
- Hong Kong community’s strong aspiration to save trees – whether woodlands, forests or individual valuable trees – from wonton destruction.

A Tree Ordinance is not just the agenda of green groups. It will have the support of the Legislative Council and the community.

As a champion of a Tree Ordinance, the Conservancy Association has engaged stakeholders – including developers – in a continual dialogue on principles and practical ways to regulate tree protection. We have formulated six principles which we believe provide the consensus to enable drafting of the bill, as follows.

- (1) Trees are important assets. Woodland with important ecological or environmental value should be designated as Tree Conservation Area. Trees with unique cultural and historical value should also be protected.
- (2) Felling of a tree larger than a certain size should be approved by the responsible Authority.
- (3) There should be full transparency in regulation of tree felling, with full information disclosure and, where necessary, public consultation.
- (4) Tree preservation and planting in private lots should be encouraged, including through means of transfer of plot ratio if public gain can be clearly demonstrated.
- (5) Management and maintenance trees should be performed by qualified arborists, with a professional body authorized for maintaining the standards and handling complaints.
- (6) There should be adequate and genuine community participation in the formulation of tree protection and greening policy.

*9. Public empowerment: Open up the Advisory Council for the Environment, the Sustainable Development Council, the Country and Marine Parks Board, and the Transport Advisory Committee.*

In September this year, the Antiquities Advisory Committee, for the first time, opened its meeting to the public. The Town Planning Board, which allows the public to attend its meetings under the amended Town Planning Ordinance, goes further by giving the public a statutory right to make representations. The Harbourfront Enhancement Committee, with half of its membership by representation, has a policy of open meetings for all items, and a quarterly public briefing meeting whereby any member of the public is welcome to speak to the Committee.

By contrast, the government's other environmentally-related advisory committees that deal with issues close to people's quality of life – the Advisory Council for the Environment, the Sustainable Development Council, the Country and Marine Parks Board, and the Transport Advisory Committee – are remarkably backward. It is high time to reform these committees to make them more transparent.

The simple step to take is for the Chief Executive to direct that these committees be fully opened up to the public, in the same model as the Harbourfront Enhancement Committee. It can, and should, be implemented right away – the mechanism is there, examples are there, the best practices are there – there is really no excuse for not doing so.

Besides opening meetings to the public, these committees should also be re-structured so that their membership includes organizational representatives. This will further enhance their accountability. In the case of the Advisory Council on the Environment, this is not even a forward step, but simply reverting to the previous system.

*10. Hong Kong and Guangdong: To establish a bilateral, tripartite conference on sustainable development for Guangdong and Hong Kong.*

Just as there is a bilateral Greater Pearl River Delta Business Council for Hong Kong and Guangdong, there should be a bilateral (Guangdong and Hong Kong sides), tripartite (government, business and green groups) Sustainable Development Council.

Hong Kong's close relationship with Guangdong is well known. The challenge in the coming years is not economic integration, which has happened already; but how to safeguard our quality of life – a question of sustainability. Without a mechanism for

cooperation, the problems common to both jurisdictions cannot be fully addressed, even though they may be debated through and through. These problems may include:

- Hong Kong investing in and subsidizing environmental clean-up in the Pearl River Delta
- Financial viability of the railway network in the whole PRD
- Feasibility of a rail-based, “green” bridge connecting Hong Kong, Macau and Zhuhai
- Cross border EIA mechanism
- Harmonization of standards and enforcement of environmental regulations

These are complex issues which take time to deliberate. They cut across many different areas which go beyond the agenda set by the current Guangdong-Hong Kong Cooperation Mechanism between the SAR’s Chief Executive and the Governor of Guangdong. We urge the CE to make use of this mechanism to kick-start cross-border cooperation in sustainable development. In our view, this can be done right away without difficulty. Under the Joint HK-GD mechanism, there is already a subgroup, made up mainly of officials, on environmental issues. There is also a Sustainable Development Subcommittee under the Greater Pearl River Delta Business Council, which is established under the same joint HK-GD mechanism. What is required is for the CE to propose to the Governor of Guangdong to merge these two entities, with the addition of community representatives and green groups, into a bilateral, tripartite, Guangdong-Hong Kong Sustainable Development Council. The Council’s relationship with the joint GD-HK mechanism will be akin to that between the tripartite Pacific Economic Cooperation Council (PECC) and APEC. It will serve as a useful forum for policy deliberation, and provides the sounding board for policies and bilateral cooperation to be developed.

### *Conclusion*

The Conservancy Association has high expectation of the ten action items. But we have not lost sight of the fact that sustainable development is a strategic, long-range issue. It cannot be achieved by any single action, or combination of ten action items. Nevertheless, we are putting forward these ten action recommendations for the Chief Executive, because we believe these are concrete achievements that befit a man of action and the former Chairperson of the Sustainable Development Council.

A truly sustainable city will require much more than is suggested by these recommendations. Looking through our past submissions, we were encouraged that some of our proposals have become reality, and disappointed that others have not progressed so far as we expected. In all, there has been much more disappointment than encouragement, and we intend to take stock of the progress in sustainability – or lack thereof – in another submission after the Policy Address. In the meantime, we hope that by taking decisive action, the Chief Executive can lead Hong Kong people in the making of a truly sustainable city.