

INSIGHT & OPINION

One million people living in a Lantau metropolis: does Hong Kong really want this?

Tom Yam decries the lack of opportunity for public input in plans to turn Lantau into another metropolis

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The scale of the development will make it impossible to preserve Lantau's beaches, woodlands, wetlands, highlands, rural areas and villages.

Do you think of Lantau Island as a vital part of Hong Kong's countryside, to be preserved for everyone to enjoy, or as Hong Kong's transport and tourism gateway to be developed to its maximum economic potential? Most of

us who escape from the concrete jungle to Lantau's tranquil country parks and unspoilt beaches would vote to keep them that way.

But the government wants to make Lantau an economic platform for the Pearl River Delta as it strives for ever closer integration with the mainland. And the developers want the lucrative opportunities this will open up for infrastructure, housing and tourism projects.

What do Hong Kong people want? We have no say because a small circle of bureaucrats and business interests are deciding the future of our largest island behind closed doors.

Here's how they envisage that future: Lantau will have a population of 1 million, an 850 per cent increase from the current 105,526. (For comparison, Hong Kong Island's current population is 1.27 million). Off east Lantau, the islets of Hei Ling Chau and Kau Yi Chau are to be enlarged by reclamation, and the wetlands behind Mui Wo redeveloped, to create 1,000 hectares of land - that's about the size of Kwun Tong - for a major new development called the East Lantau Metropolis, which will have a business district and housing for 400,000 to 700,000 people.

On Lantau proper, the 20kms of southern beaches in Cheung Sha, Pui O and Tong Fuk, and areas adjoining the country parks, are earmarked for tourism-oriented commercial developments. The four correctional institutions will be relocated to open up their sea-facing sites for housing and other development. Subway lines running east-west and north-south will connect these residential and commercial zones with the airport, the Hong Kong-Macau-Zhuhai bridge landing and Tung Chung in north Lantau, and with western Hong Kong Island and Kowloon. A multi-lane highway will encircle the island to complete this vision of Lantau as a new metropolis and tourist hub.



On Lantau proper, the 20kms of southern beaches in Cheung Sha, Pui O and Tong Fuk, and areas adjoining the country parks, are earmarked for tourism-oriented commercial developments. Photo: Oliver Tsang

In short, Lantau will be transformed into another urban municipality like Hong Kong Island and Sha Tin.

These plans, set out in a recent paper produced by the Development Bureau's Planning Department, were drawn up with input from a government-appointed group, the Lantau Development Advisory Committee, created last year. Its 30 members comprise 10 senior government officials plus 20 individuals from the private sector and academia. Among the 20, 11 have declared business interests in Lantau or family with land holdings in Lantau, and two are pro-government legislators.

The committee is chaired by Secretary for Development Paul Chan Mo-po, who has made known his proclivity for building in country parks. With government, pro-government and pro-development members in the majority on the committee, the economic incentives to "maximise the development potential of Lantau" (Chan's words) are bound to trump any benevolent motives to conserve its natural environment as a public good.

Indeed, in the Planning Department's 37-page paper on Lantau's future, only five pages are devoted to conservation. The government's previous concept plan for Lantau, revised and published in 2007 after public consultation, aimed "to focus the development of major economic infrastructure and tourism uses in North Lantau, preserving the rest of Lantau for nature conservation". The new plan, without even the pretence of public consultation, extends economic and tourism development to "the rest of Lantau".

The scale of the development will make it impossible to preserve Lantau's beaches, woodlands, wetlands, highlands, rural areas and villages. How do you reconcile nature conservation with an MTR station in Mui Wo's wetlands, trains running under Lantau Peak, and hotels, hostels and theme parks along the south Lantau coast? The committee doesn't even try.



A study is already being to evaluate the technical feasibility of an extension of the cable car system from Ngong Ping to Tai O.
Photo: May Tse

This is evident from the published minutes of its meetings. For instance, there were few suggestions on developing Lantau based on the guiding principle of preserving its natural environment. A proposal for an independent analysis on the need for the East Lantau Metropolis, based on population projections and other trends, was rejected.

Without ascertaining the need for such a massive project, the government requested HK\$227 million to study the technical feasibility of reclamation around the two islets. A HK\$16 million study is already being conducted

by a consultant to evaluate the technical feasibility of developing a spa and resort complex at Cheung Sha, and the extension of the cable car system from Ngong Ping to Tai O. Another technical study, at a cost of HK\$9.3 million, is being done by a different consultant on the transport infrastructure connecting between Kennedy Town and the proposed East Lantau Metropolis. A fait accompli approach is being taken with little public scrutiny.

The committee and its four subcommittees meet behind closed doors. Its meetings do not require a quorum. Apart from the government officials, other members are not identified when they make comments. These private individuals are thus relieved of accountability while they influence policies affecting us all.

Do Hong Kong people want decisions on Lantau made for them by vested interests? We must ask ourselves how much we value Lantau's natural heritage, whether its conservation should be a principle of planning, and whether the decision-making process set up by the government can achieve a balanced policy of developing Lantau while not destroying it.

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