

LCQ5: The Northern Metropolis Development Strategy

Following is a question by the Hon Tony Tse and a reply by the Secretary for the Environment, Mr Wong Kam-sing, in the Legislative Council today (January 19):

Question:

The Government has put forward the Northern Metropolis Development Strategy in the 2021 Policy Address with a view to driving Hong Kong's economic as well as innovation and technology development, increasing housing supply, and at the same time formulating and implementing a conservation policy. However, some members of the architectural, surveying, town planning and landscape sectors hold different views regarding the details of the proposed 2 000-hectare conservation area. In this connection, will the Government inform this Council:

(1) of the study basis for the total area, site distribution, conservation proposals, etc. of the aforesaid conservation area, and whether it will conduct further studies and make amendments in the light of the views of the sectors;

(2) regarding the Sam Po Shue Wetland Conservation Park which will cover an area of around 520 hectares of the aforesaid conservation area, as some members of the sectors consider that some sites within the Park have relatively low ecological conservation value, and that incorporating such sites into the conservation area will affect the enormous development potentials to be brought about by a number of existing and proposed MTR stations as well as the Shenzhen Innovation and Technology Zone in the vicinity of the Park, whether the Government will review afresh the relevant planning so as to optimise the development potentials of the land concerned; and

(3) as some members of the sectors are worried that the planning and conservation studies for the Northern Metropolis will slow down and even bring a halt to the progress of the public and private development projects which are underway or awaiting vetting and approval, how the Government will prevent the occurrence of such situations and whether it will take measures to expedite the progress of the existing development projects in the district in order to increase the land and housing supply in the near future?

Reply:

Acting President,

The Chief Executive announced in October last year the Northern Metropolis Development Strategy (Development Strategy) which proposed for the

first time to adopt a proactive conservation policy, and to resume private fish ponds and wetlands with conservation value in Deep Bay (including areas around Tsim Bei Tsui, Nam Sang Wai, Fung Lok Wai, Tai Sang Wai, San Tin/Sam Po Shue, Hoo Hok Wai, Sha Ling/Nam Hang) and, together with the adjoining Government land, to establish a system of Wetland Conservation Parks (WCPs) to create environmental capacity, so that Hong Kong can strike a proper balance between conservation and development and achieve "Co-existence of Development and Conservation".

Our reply to the question raised by the Hon Tse is as follows:

(1) The Northern Metropolis in the New Territories has diverse habitats, including large areas of wetlands such as fish ponds, marshes and mangroves, whereas the Mai Po and Inner Deep Bay area is designated as an internationally important wetland under the Ramsar Convention. The wetlands in the Northern Metropolis are ecological environment which are priority areas for conservation in the Guangdong-Hong Kong-Macao Greater Bay Area and even in Southern China. The Development Strategy aims to adopt more proactive conservation measures to protect the ecological value of these areas to build a comprehensive wetland conservation system.

The wetland conservation system as proposed in the Development Strategy is estimated to have a total area of about 2 000 hectares (ha), which includes the existing Hong Kong Wetland Park (about 62 ha), the Mai Po Nature Reserve (about 370 ha), the proposed establishment of three WCPs (i.e. Nam Sang Wai WCP (about 400 ha), Sam Po Shue WCP (about 520 ha) and Hoo Hok Wai WCP (about 300 ha)), the expansion of the Hong Kong Wetland Park (about 240 ha), as well as establishment of Sha Ling/Nam Hang Nature Park (about 4 ha) and Tsim Bei Tsui/Lau Fau Shan/Pak Nai Coastal Protection Park (about 145 ha). These areas cover ecologically important fish ponds and marshes, which are internationally and regionally important foraging ground and habitat for migratory waterbirds.

As the Development Strategy is a conceptual strategic plan, the locations and estimated areas of the proposed WCPs shown in the Development Strategy report are for illustrative purposes only and do not reflect the exact locations or areas. In order to determine the exact locations/areas and management model for the three new WCPs, the Sha Ling/Nam Hang Nature Park and the expansion of the Hong Kong Wetland Park, as well as to assess the effectiveness of the relevant measures in creating environmental capacity, the Agriculture, Fisheries and Conservation Department (AFCD) will launch a strategic feasibility study within this year and consult stakeholders in due course. In addition, the Development Bureau will commence a feasibility study on the development potential of the Tsim Bei Tsui, Lau Fau Shan and Pak Nai areas within this year, while the Environment Bureau will in parallel explore the area to be reserved for the coastal protection park through this study.

(2) Regarding the future development of the Sam Po Shue wetland area, the Government is advancing the San Tin/Lok Ma Chau Development Node project, with the aim to commence the first batch of works in 2024. This development node will be mainly for innovation and technology uses and, together with the

Hong Kong-Shenzhen Innovation and Technology Park in Lok Ma Chau Loop, will form the San Tin Technopole, which will generate a synergy effect with the Innovation and Technology Zone on the other side of the Shenzhen River.

At the same time, the Sam Po Shue area covers a large area of ecologically important fish ponds and wetlands, which provide foraging ground and habitat for migratory waterbirds and other wildlife, and constitute an important part of the Deep Bay wetland ecosystem. The local fish pond operators in Sam Po Shue have also been actively conducting habitat management work for years to provide foraging ground and habitat for waterbirds. The ecological value of fish ponds has been enhanced while conserving the local cultural heritage of traditional aquaculture. The proposed Sam Po Shue WCP will be included in the AFCD's strategic feasibility study to be commenced this year.

The Government will strive for the co-existence of development and conservation in the planning of the Northern Metropolis, with a view to achieving sustainable development.

(3) Regarding the establishment of the WCP system proposed in the Development Strategy, the Government will conduct further study to work out the exact locations and areas of the proposed WCPs.

The planning and development of a development project involves a process. Generally speaking, for development projects involving statutory planning procedures, even when the developer has obtained planning permission from the Town Planning Board (TPB), the developer will still be required to fulfill the approval conditions timely and commence the approved development within a set time frame. For example, the development project's conservation and management plan, etc. must comply with all requirements and conditions imposed by the Government in order to be considered having fulfilled the relevant planning requirements. The development project shall also comply with other statutory requirements. For instance, some development projects will still need to conduct the statutory environmental impact assessment in accordance with the Environmental Impact Assessment Ordinance (the Ordinance) to demonstrate that the environmental impacts arising from the development could fully comply with the requirements of the Ordinance and obtain an environmental permit.

Even though the AFCD will commence a strategic feasibility study this year to work out the areas and management model of these WCPs, relevant private development project owners can still follow up on the relevant planning requirements or approval conditions with relevant departments. The AFCD's strategic feasibility study will fully consider the impact on the overall function and operation of the WCP system arising from different private development projects within the area of each proposed WCP which have fulfilled the relevant planning requirements or already been granted with planning permission, in formulating the overall strategy.

Regarding development applications within the Northern Metropolis that have yet to obtain statutory planning approval or are newly received, they

will be handled in accordance with the established mechanism, including being considered based on the existing statutory plans, the planning intention of the relevant land use zoning, and relevant planning considerations. Relevant Government departments will carefully consider the specific development proposals and conservation plans of the projects from different policy and technical perspectives, including whether the projects fulfill the policy intentions described in the Development Strategy (including the development of the WCPs and the overall wetland conservation objective), and provide comments for the TPB's consideration.

Thank you, (acting) President.