



'Cut land premiums to revitalise harbour'

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Olga Wong

The city's waterfront could be more vibrant if the government lowered land premiums for private waterfront sites to encourage activities that were less profitable but more interesting, the business sector said yesterday.

This was one of the suggestions by the Harbour Business Forum, the city's biggest business alliance, after a nine-month study on measures to improve the accessibility and management of the harbourfront.

The forum has 121 business members, including 29 corporate members, 53 professional members and 29 supporting members from business chambers and professional associations.

"It is like what has been proposed

by the government to revitalise industrial buildings," said Margaret Brooke of Professional Property Services, chairwoman of the forum's best practice committee. "If they [land owners] could have some allowance in the premium paid or some other ways like waivers, that may help develop more interesting projects which don't necessarily have to maximise revenue."

Brooke said some revitalisation projects might not give the best financial return. The business sector would meet Secretary for Development Carrie Lam Cheng Yuet-ngoi next week to discuss the Development Bureau's public-private partnership proposal, she said.

The study found that about a quarter of all land within a 300-metre

radius of the harbourfront is taken up by roads. About 50 kilometres of multi-lane highways are within a couple of blocks of the harbourfront.

Open space and recreational use account for eight per cent and only 15 per cent of the harbourfront is estimated to be accessible to the public.

One underlying cause, the forum said, was the lack of policy priority and weak governance structures for the waterfront. The government was advised to set up a single accountable body, like a harbour committee, to manage the waterfront by next year.

But in the medium term, the forum said, a more powerful harbour agency should replace the committee by 2013 or 2014.

Fiona Waters, the study's consultant and a director of consultancy

firm GHK, said the agency should have statutory power and secure funding, which would allow it to become an independent agent. The agency should be led by an independent chairman to bring more flexibility to harbour management and harness support from the private sector.

In recent years the government has regularly been urged to set up a harbour authority, and it has asked the Harbourfront Enhancement Committee to propose a management model for waterfront sites.

Instead of setting up a statutory authority like the Urban Renewal Authority or the Airport Authority, the committee proposed setting up a harbour commission under the Development Bureau to save time.

Unlike a harbour authority, the

harbour agency proposed by the forum would not manage port areas and it would not have the power to resume land. The agency would need to seek Lands Department approval before acquiring waterfront sites.

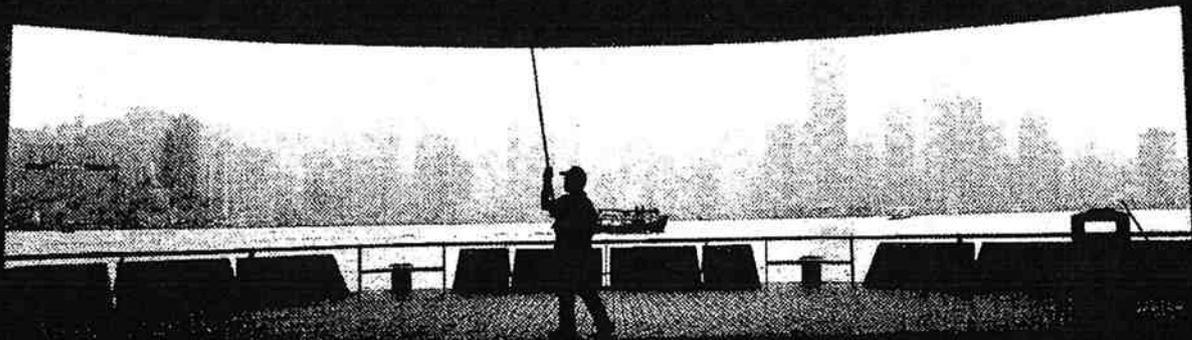
"We are not working for the interests of the business sector," said forum spokesman Vincent Cheng Hoi-chuen, chairman of HSBC Asia-Pacific. He said the forum's research effort was driven by a vision of a better harbour.

A bureau spokeswoman said it welcomed and shared the forum's views on dedicating more resources to harbourfront enhancement, adopting an integrated approach and acknowledging the importance of co-ordinating interdepartmental efforts.



On the waterfront

According to a study by the business sector, only 15 per cent of the harbourfront is accessible to the public



Yau Tsim Mong

Mong Kok cut off from harbourfront by highways and cargo working areas

Kwun Tong

Harbourfront blocked by highways and cargo working areas

Central and Western

Coastline dominated by piers, while open spaces poorly connected with hinterland

Eastern

Harbourfront blocked by Island Eastern Corridor and typhoon shelters

SCMP GRAPHIC PHOTO JIM TAYLOR

SOURCE: HARBOUR ENVIRONMENT FUND