

Mystery deepens over giant Hong Kong ferris wheel overlooking harbour

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TOURISM

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Mystery surrounds proposed harbourfront attraction, with no sign of it being constructed almost a year after the contract was awarded

A plan for a giant sightseeing ferris wheel to be built overlooking Hong Kong's harbour is shrouded in secrecy, even though a patch of land has been allocated on which to construct it.

In May last year the Lands Department awarded a three-year contract to Swiss AEX, allowing it to operate an observation wheel in front of Central Pier berths nine and 10 for a monthly rent of HK\$850,000.

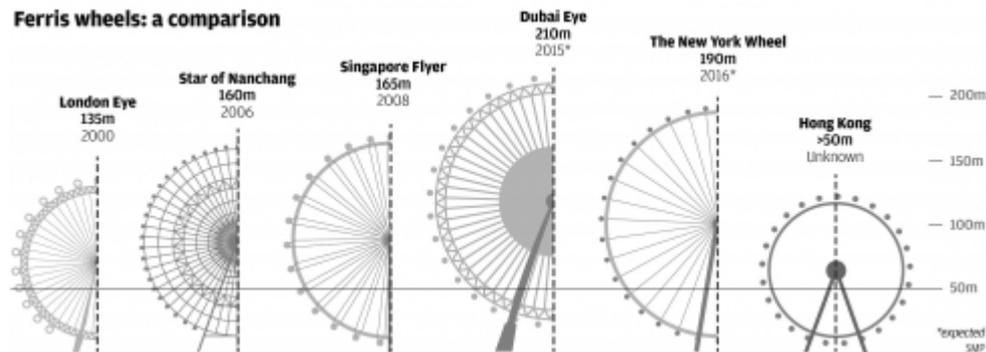
But almost a year on, there is no sign of any structure being erected on the site and details of the plan are being kept secret.

Recently banners went up around the earmarked site behind Central Ferry Piers 9 and 10, reading 'Hong Kong Observation Wheel', which include the sponsor's name Swiss AEX.

Swiss AEX, which is recorded in the Hong Kong company registry, opened an observation wheel in Bangkok last year. It beat four competitors to win the Hong Kong tender.

A request for information by the *South China Morning Post* was referred from the company's Hong Kong marketing agent to an email address.

Ferris wheels: a comparison



[1]A spokesman, identified only as C. Hansol, responded: "Since Swiss AEX has won the tender there are a lot of inquirers about this project ... we normally don't provide any information during the development or construction of a project."

The spokesman said the group's CEO was willing to give the *Post* an exclusive interview "under the condition that the article will be subject to our review and final approval before publication".

The *Post* rejected the company's offer.

A Lands Department spokesman said details of the project would have to come from Swiss AEX. The only information he provided was that the wheel's diameter should be "no less than 50 metres".

Even members of the Harbourfront Commission, which oversees the development of the

waterfront, have not been informed of details on the project.



[2]Commission member Paul Zimmerman said it was "very odd" that members had not been involved in the tender process and had no say in the wheel's technical specifications.

He added that members had raised concerns that there were many attractions in Hong Kong where tourists can view the city from height.

"It's very different from Singapore. It's not really a thing for Hong Kong," he said. "But it would be fun. We didn't want to stop the project."

Michael Wu Siu-ieng, chairman of the Hong Kong Travel Industry Council, said a wheel was sure to be an attraction for tourists, but would be greatly affected by the weather.

He suggested that marketing initiatives for the project should start at least six months before it was launched.

Regardless of when the observation wheel may open, it may face a question of profitability.

While the London Eye is a success story welcoming an average of 3.5 million visitors a year, the Singapore Flyer, which opened in 2008 as the world's tallest wheel, went into receivership last year.



[3] And the company which came up with the idea of building a wheel in Hong Kong back in 2011 did not survive.

Great City Attractions Global from Britain put in a joint proposal with the Hall Organisation to the Hong Kong government about building a transportable, 60-metre high, 42-cabin Ferris wheel facing Victoria Harbour.

Great City Attractions Global went into administration in 2012.

The two companies operated 25 wheels in nine countries, from 40 metres to 165 metres.

In 2011, Dubai-based Freij Entertainment International - backed by Balam Chainrai, the former owner of Portsmouth Football Club - joined the race to build the wheel.

Looking beyond Hong Kong, wheels around the world are competing to be the tallest.

High Roller in Las Vegas opened recently at a height of 167.6 metres, two metres higher than Singapore's.

The New York Wheel, due to open in 2016, is targeting a height of 190 metres, but the planned Dubai Eye, which could open next year, is likely to be 20 metres higher.

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