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# Public-private partnership needed for Hong Kong's harbourfront to thrive

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Submitted by Jay.chan on Jun 9th 2015, 12:57am

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SCMP Editorial

Champions of the city's magnificent harbour are fond of saying it belongs to all of us. Does that mean all taxpayers should finance a statutory authority tasked with safeguarding access to the 73km of shoreline regardless of whether we live near it, use it or have any affection for it? Or should it be self-financing once it is well established, as the government has proposed?

This question surfaced during a public consultation on the proposed authority. It reflects concerns that if it were compelled to conduct commercial operations, the mission to revitalise the public amenity of the waterfront could be undermined. As a result, advisers to the government seem unlikely to suggest that the authority stand on its own feet financially.

The ultimate mission is to entrust the authority with management of all the sites alongside the harbour. This is our third and possibly last opportunity to get harbour conservation right. The first attempt a decade ago set up the Harbourfront Enhancement Committee to give the public a bigger say amid fragmented government control. The government accepted this committee's advice to replace it with a commission with more authority which, in turn, recommended its own replacement with a statutory body.

The harbour foreshore is natural heritage that does not easily lend itself to commercial exploitation without compromising public access and amenity. Vincent Ng Wing-shun, chairman of the Harbourfront Commission's core group for public engagement, said the public worried that under a self-financing principle the future authority would only take on profit-making projects. To safeguard the public interest, there is an argument for statutory provision of financial operating independence and a balance between public, private and government input to ensure emphasis on vibrant waterfronts that meet value-for-public-money tests of the kind run by the Audit Commission from time to time.

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