

Civic experts a fount of wisdom for officials

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Two policy studies released in December underline the high quality of research produced by some civic and other non-governmental organisations. Both, by coincidence, are about water.

The first, by the Harbour Business Forum, is called the "Integrated Harbour Vision and Delivery Plan", and proposes a single body to oversee the whole harbour area. It makes an impressive case for such an organization and outlines the various administrative steps that would be needed to bring it about.

It is a professional piece of work with vision. The property, tourism and other business and professional groups behind the forum engaged highly qualified land and planning consultants for the study. The authors ask how a unified harbour authority could provide both a clear strategy and the leadership to make the harbour a vibrant and accessible asset for local people and visitors.

However, they are realistic. They address decision-making and financing issues.

Also, they have made a point of presenting their case from the point of view of the bureaucrats who would have to implement such a policy if the government accepted it.

The other report comes from the Civic Exchange think tank, with funding from the Noble Group, the commodities trading giant. Called "Liquid Assets", it is about the security and management of the Pearl River Delta's water supplies. It is full of interesting information. For example, did you know that Hong Kong uses 3.35 billion litres of water per day –more than double, per person, what people use in Paris?

The report examines what Hong Kong can do to reduce its dependence on mainland water supplies, given the rising demand across the border. Suggestions focus on finding alternative supplies through better use of our plentiful rainfall, exploring desalination and reducing waste.

The report anticipates a gap between current conservation efforts and the predicted one-third rise in water usage in Hong Kong over the next 20 years. I wonder whether demand will really rise as fast as the forecast suggests. I also think that much of the problem simply comes down to pricing.

As the study points out, our water is so heavily subsidised that 17 per cent of homes pay nothing for it and only 21 per cent pay bills of more than HK\$75 a

month. As a proportion of household expenditure, families in many cities in Europe or the United States pay four or five times what we do for water. You use it more carefully when you have to pay that much.

Both reports are available (with a lot of other interesting material) on the organisations' websites.

Their approaches are fairly different. One has a vision for our harbour shared by more and more of the community. It suggests that we really can have a high-quality waterfront with public space – like Sydney, to use a common example – if we get the administrative structure right. That is something we can all understand and support.

The other study gives us bad news. Water – absolutely essential but also completely taken for granted – is going to be a problem in the future. Most of us would rather not know: we assume it will go on coming out of the tap almost free of charge forever. It is the sort of thing policymakers and the rest of us must be tempted to put off.

There may have been a time when policy research by the city's non-governmental bodies was rare or of poor quality. If so, it is easy to see why officials did not take outsiders' views very seriously. We still hear complaints that the bureaucracy does not listen.

Now there is a lot of public feedback, much of it conflicting, and it must be impossible for officials to keep up. But policymakers would be unwise to wave aside this sort of high-quality research produced by today's flourishing civic society. I am fairly sure some of it matches or even beats in-house studies.