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SDA Proposes Building Express Line to Strengthen North-South Connections

The SD Advocates (SDA), an independent think tank focusing on Hong Kong's sustainable development, has recently submitted a proposal to the Financial Secretary for the construction of an express railway to strengthen the north-south connections between Hong Kong's technology and financial centres, based on the routing of the previously planned Hung Kong Railway.

Professor Lau Chi-Pang, Chairman of SDA said, "Connectivity is the key to Hong Kong's success. Currently, the railway construction of the Northern Metropolis focuses on internal network development and cross-border connections with Shenzhen. However, connections between the Northern Metropolis and other parts of Hong Kong are equally important. In particular, the Northern Metropolis and the Victoria Harbour Area are Hong Kong's two major innovation, technology and financial centres. Connecting them with high-speed rail or rapid transit can generate enormous economic benefits."

"By making reference to the 'Airport Express,' the concept of the Northern Metropolis Express (NME) Line aims to better connect our two economic engines, reducing commuting time to around 30 minutes. This would help optimise talents allocation, improve overall productivity, increase the attractiveness of the Northern Metropolis, encourage more businesses to establish operations there, and attract more residents to relocate. This would also effectively activate the value of residential, commercial, and innovation and technology land in the area, promoting synergies between the two major metropolitan areas," added Professor Lau.

According to the Government's "Hong Kong Major Transport Infrastructure Development Blueprint," one of the planned north-south railway lines was the "Hung Kong Railway" connecting Hung Shui Kiu (which will become part of the Northern Metropolis) to Hong Kong Island. Its planned route would pass through several major stations, including Sunny Bay, allowing direct access from Hung Shui Kiu to Hong Kong Island. This will not only benefit Lantau Island's development but will also effectively integrate the airport into the express rail

network. However, the future of Hung Kong railway remains uncertain due to the temporary shelving of the Kau Yi Chau artificial islands project.



[The original planned route of the Hung Kong Railway]

Since the Government has already completed the initial route planning, SDA believes that the Hung Kong Railway route has the value of providing direct cross-sea access to connect the two major metropolitan areas. Rather than replanning or abandoning it, the proposed NME Line could be planned on the basis of the Hung Kong Railway's routing for more effective resource utilisation.

With the artificial islands project shelved, the Government should consider revisiting the engineering approach, using bridge piers instead of artificial islands, and reducing the project scale. In the early stages, the section from Hung Shui Kiu to Sunny Bay could be completed first, and Sunny Bay Station could be added to the Airport Express line, linking the airport with the two major metropolitan areas.

Professor Lau Chi-Pang added, "The terminus could even be extended to Ngau Tam Mei, building on the existing infrastructure. This would greatly facilitate academics and students at the future Northern Metropolis University Town (NMUT) when travelling to Admiralty, Central, or returning to their campuses."

The proposal also states that, given the considerable time required for railway infrastructure construction, the Government could leverage the opportunity of low-altitude economic development to consider first establishing a "Northern Metropolis-Central" low-altitude flight corridor, prioritising the needs of high-net-worth individuals engaged in business and research between the two metropolitan areas before the completion of the NME Line.

To alleviate the increasing pressure on passenger flows between the Northern Metropolis - Victoria Harbour metropolitan areas, the SDA proposal also puts up another option: accelerating construction of the Central Rail Link, initially scheduled for completion after 2039, to directly connect Northern passenger flows to Kowloon's city centre. SDA proposes using the King's Park site, which will be vacated following Queen Elizabeth Hospital's relocation, as the terminus of the Central Rail Link. Properties could be built above the MTR station, expanding the supply of commercial and residential buildings in Hong Kong while reducing the financial burden of infrastructure construction.

Hong Kong's complex topography makes cross-harbour engineering particularly challenging and costly, with the cost of a new express line potentially exceeding HK$100 billion. Direct revenue from ticket sales alone is typically insufficient to recoup such a massive infrastructure investment.

SDA is of the view that the project's viability should be assessed based on its "external benefits," including quantifiable benefits such as land appreciation, economic growth and tax revenue, commuting time savings, traffic congestion relief, and promotion of balanced regional development. If this project can drive the overall development of the Northern Metropolis area, the resulting comprehensive fiscal and economic returns will make it a strategically valuable investment. The key lies in whether the Government can effectively "harvest" the external value created by the infrastructure upgrade through mechanisms such as taxation or development revenue, thereby maximising the project's financial sustainability and social benefits.



[Image of proposed terminus of the Central Rail Link]

Professor Lau Chi-Pang said, "The Northern Metropolis is currently in its early stages of development. The Government should develop a long-term infrastructure plan that incorporates the concept of the NME Line. As always, SDA strives to focus on sustainable social development, with the hope of stimulating informed discussion and promoting collaboration between the Government and various sectors to study specific technical details."

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