

OPINION

Unique opportunity

Ian Brownlee says Northern Metropolis can combine best of central planning and free market

The Northern Metropolis is in the news almost every day. The big policy focus for the administration, it is determining a new future for Hong Kong. Part of the New Territories, which were dubbed “a land between” in the 1980s, the area was once little more than a rural leftover between urban Hong Kong and the mainland, where Shenzhen’s paddy fields could be seen from a Lok Ma Chau hill.

China’s opening-up policies saw Deng Xiaoping promoting Shenzhen in the 1990s. Suddenly, a world-class, high-rise economic miracle existed to the north of Hong Kong. We planners argued that the context for the planning of the northern New Territories should recognise this change, but successive administrations did not make this conceptual leap.

Instead, we had the disjointed development of several “new towns”, mainly providing housing. In between were large areas of mixed commercial, residential and industrial activities mainly in temporary buildings, essentially unplanned rural slums. Across the river is now a gleaming new city, bigger than Hong Kong, enjoying success as China’s Silicon Valley and a reputation as a “garden city”. Hongkongers increasingly enjoy going there.

For about 20 years, Hong Kong struggled to identify a clear role in this fast-changing economic environment. But China’s 14th five-year plan provided a policy context in which Hong Kong could play a positive role. It also established a regional role for Hong Kong in the Greater Bay Area.

Almost every document relating to the Northern Metropolis starts with reference to the 14th five-year plan. More recent ones, such as the latest conceptual outline

plan for the San Tin Technopole in November, reference the 15th five-year plan (2026 to 2030). The establishment of national policy objectives for Hong Kong provides a context for the Northern Metropolis and a guide for the future.

The Northern Metropolis brand has given a new identity to a very disparate area stretching across northern Hong Kong from Sha Tau Kok in the east to Lau Fau Shan in the west. This includes the towns of Tin Shui Wai and Yuen Long, the wetlands of Mai Po and the ecologically important recreational areas of eastern Tai Po.

Achieving things quickly under the existing system was difficult. Suggestions for a higher level, more focused administrative structure were taken forward in the policy address last year.

Vowing to “accelerate the development of the Northern Metropolis”, Chief Executive John Lee Ka-chiu “decided to raise the level of decision-making” by establishing a committee for the project under his leadership, to streamline administrative workflows and cut unnecessary barriers. Three working groups were established, chaired by high-level officials.

One is the Working Group on Devising Development and Operation Models, for industry parks. Another is the Working Group on Planning and Construction of the University Town, for the Northern Metropolis University Town. The third is the Working Group on Planning and Development, responsible for the implementation process of planning, engineering, transport and environmental protection. A dedicated project supervision office has also been established to strengthen the coordination and supervision of the approval process.

Three years ago, the documentation for the Northern Metropolis was very general, making it difficult to identify what was required and what should happen. It was all about flexibility, innovation, technology, integration with Shenzhen and quick implementation.

Recent documentation is more focused and more clearly identifies post-secondary education, scientific research and the development of new industries flowing from this research.



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The administration has quickly reviewed and changed policies that have been in existence for decades. The first phase of the Hong Kong park portion of the Hetao cooperation zone was opened by the chief executive last month. It already has two buildings occupied by more than 60 institutions and businesses. There has been a positive response to invitations of expressions of interest for releasing other land to the market to accelerate the development of the park.

On December 29, Secretary for Development Bernadette Linn Hon-ho said

the government would set up a dedicated, wholly owned company to develop and operate an industry park in Hung Shui Kiu as part of the Northern Metropolis. This company will build the park infrastructure and implement a range of public-private partnership models to support key enterprises.

Tenders for land disposal at Hung Shui Kiu will provide for mixed-use development. Importantly, the successful bidder will, for the first time to the best of my knowledge, be able to pay the land premium in stages rather than in one lump sum up front. This, along with other technical changes, will make the projects more attractive.

The success of these proposals will become evident in the next two to three years. How the new systems will be more efficient will depend on the operation of the bureaucracy. How effective will government-owned companies be, compared with a private-sector approach? How can organisations from the outside with more exposure to flexibility and innovation be effectively engaged? The role of statutory bodies like the Town Planning Board must also be considered as a positive avenue for good planning, public engagement and oversight.

The Northern Metropolis provides a unique and exciting opportunity to combine central planning at the national level with the historically free-market operation of Hong Kong’s economy.

The definition and purpose provided by China’s five-year plans for the Northern Metropolis are quickly changing the area from the forgotten place it had been for at least 20 years.

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