**SCMP Article**

**No good reason to veto plan for a car-free Central**

Several months ago, there was controversy about a private individual’s proposal to scrap tram services through Central. Nearly everyone opposed the idea, and it vanished. Now, a number of groups have come forward with a very different and more serious suggestion: ban most traffic on Des Voeux Road in Central – but keep the trams.

This is not a new idea. Professional societies presented a similar plan back in 2000. But, perhaps for the first time, it is being backed by a wide variety of supporters and stakeholders, with Clean Air Network as the lead organiser. As well as groups with planning and environmental expertise, local commercial interests like landlords are on board. There are some doubters, but this is essentially a broad coalition, not a “greens versus business” fight.

Under the proposal, Des Voeux Road, from Western Market to Peddar Street, would be largely pedestrianised, though trams would still run along the road. The area would become what urban planners call a “linear park”. It could have seating, greenery and other features, not least far more space for people to walk in.

My business is on Des Voeux Road, and I have been briefed on the proposal.

In principle, the initiative makes perfect sense. Often, there are too many pedestrians for the pavements to handle. Vehicles are backed up on the surrounding streets. Ongoing redevelopment of office and retail properties will create even more congestion – the additional road space is simply not there. Something clearly has to give.

From a practical point of view, any change of this sort will cause some disruption. This initiative would involve re-routing buses and making different arrangements for delivery vehicles.

Supporters of the idea believe these issues are manageable. They point out that the opening of new transport links, like MTR extensions and bus route consolidation, offer new opportunities to restructure traffic flows in Central. Crucially, north-south roads crossing Des Voeux Road would remain open to traffic, so the corridor would not be a barrier to the overall flow of vehicles.

My understanding is that some landlords and businesses in surrounding areas are concerned that traffic will be squeezed out of the pedestrianised zone into their own roads and streets. This is not an argument in favour of the status quo – which, as I say, is unsustainable anyway. It simply proves what we already know: that congestion is bad for business, not to mention our air, health and quality of life generally. It is surely an argument in favour of tackling the problem.

However, proposals of this sort often fail in Hong Kong because of opposition from minority interest groups – the “lack of consensus” we hear so much about. This has become a depressingly common reason for inaction. All sorts of social, economic and especially planning reforms are abandoned because of a “lack of consensus”. People blame civil servants for bureaucratic inertia, or policymakers for putting vested interests first. Our overall political structure obviously does not help.

But maybe we have all become part of the problem. The attitude seems to be: if other people are allowed to veto change because it doesn’t suit them, why should the rest of us make a sacrifice for the greater good?

The Des Voeux Road proposal would inconvenience many commuters and businesses who are accustomed to the current flow of cars, buses or vans in Central. The proposal is not all or nothing, and there must be room for some give and take. For example, just part or separate segments of the road could be pedestrianised, or deliveries could be allowed at certain times. The key thing is that, on balance, we would all benefit far more.

There is one more reason to take this proposal seriously: if Hong Kong as a community cannot accept and implement a sensible solution to one particular pressing problem, what is happening to us? Other cities can do this sort of thing. If we cannot, what hope is there for solving the really big challenges for the future?