**SCMP Article**

**HK will come to appreciate its regional links**

Chief Executive Leung Chun-ying delivered his last policy address two weeks ago. He took a step back and compared his achievements in office with his manifesto back in 2012. As well as social and welfare issues, he particularly focused on housing, transport and other infrastructure. Housing has been a major challenge. But the overall infrastructure situation has progressed significantly.

We have more hotel space, conference and exhibition facilities and business and office districts in the pipeline. Kai Tak is an obvious example, but expansion is under way in Tung Chung and planned for other parts of the New Territories. Also, there is the technology and innovation hub at Lok Ma Chau.

At the same time, major long-term transport projects are nearing completion. The high-speed Guangzhou-Shenzhen-Hong Kong express rail link will massively improve our connections with Guangdong province and other areas. The Hong Kong-Zhuhai-Macau bridge will reduce travel times between points on either side of the Pearl River estuary.

So far, these projects have been associated with controversy and criticism. Once they are open, however, we will see them in terms of opening up a world of new possibilities. No one knows for sure the full range of effects we can expect when cities like Shanwei (汕尾) or Shaoguan (韶關) are less than a couple of hours away by rail, or we have direct bus routes to the Zhuhai (珠海) suburbs. Certainly, millions of people in Zhuhai and the surrounding areas will have easier access to the Hong Kong airport. The region’s manufacturing industry will benefit from improved freight links to our air and sea facilities. And Hong Kong people themselves will find it much easier to get to districts that currently seem far away. These include areas that are still relatively undeveloped – where all sorts of new industries or other activities might grow.

The idea of Hong Kong in a regional context is a sensitive issue. People here are very aware of the differences between this city and the mainland. They greatly value our rights and freedoms – not simply as economic advantages, but as vital to our whole local way of life. And so they should. The problem is that all talk of integration and increased cross-border activity is treated with suspicion.

Common sense tells us that a city of 7 million cannot be cut off from its surroundings. And Hong Kong’s surroundings are becoming exceptional by any standards. If you have visited the Pearl River Delta over the past few decades – or just looked at the maps – you will know that a true “metropolis” is taking shape. It is not just some slogan. The cities from Zhuhai to our west, up to Foshan (佛山) and Guangzhou and down to Dongguan (東莞) and Shenzhen are becoming a cluster that rivals Greater Tokyo.

Transport and other infrastructure is creating an increasingly seamless urban area. People commute between cities for work and education, and for leisure. Hong Kong has important differences and does not want to lose them. But we will be missing out if we mentally fence ourselves in. Other parts of the Pearl River Delta region are developing new business districts, residential areas and facilities like conference centres and hotels. Hong Kong will not be unique in terms of hardware. But it will stand out for its software – its institutions, skills and quality. The Pearl River Delta powerhouse will boost Hong Kong’s role as a provider of high-end services.

Hong Kong people are understandably concerned about overcrowding, and this is why we should focus on value rather than quantity when it comes to industries like tourism. But improved links work both ways. Not all customers and clients will need to come here. In many cases, we can export know-how by taking it to the mainland side. The MTR is a well-known example, with its mass-transit projects in Shenzhen and elsewhere. And demand is likely to rise for Hong Kong professional services of all sorts – not just finance and law, but in areas like health care, education, culture and much more.

No chief executive can solve every problem in five years. But in terms of connectivity, we have come a long way since 2012. The potential long-term benefits are probably far greater than we realise.