

## **Breathe easy, clean air is in sight**

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Hong Kong's growing calls for action on air pollution are not falling on deaf ears. In May, the Council for Sustainable Development launches the next step in work begun last year to find solutions to local air pollution. Heeding many pleas for more action expressed at its forums last year, the Council will provide the public with a channel to express concerns – and, crucially, a chance to make a difference.

This next step is an “invitation and response document” on air quality and a method that effectively engaged the community on other pressing matters of public concern. This document follows the Council's 2006 report, *Clean Air and Blue Skies – the Choice Is Ours* \*, which recommended to the Government bold measures to address Hong Kong's direct air pollution issues.

It is clear that local pollution in the wider context of the Pearl River Delta's deteriorating air quality is a principal factor in the equation. This is reflected in the report by the Civic Exchange and the Hong Kong University of Science and Technology's Institute for the Environment that showed that for just over half the days in 2006 the dominant source of air pollution was local.

It is self-evident that cleaning the air most immediate to us means attacking pollution created here, from our vehicles, our power usage, and even marine traffic. It means considering the apparent and clear health implications in this approach. Urgent action must replace gesticulation. We must prioritise our efforts, taking out the regional considerations that otherwise leave people frustrated and feeling helpless to do anything.

The community's calls for more Government action must be put in context. Work on air is ongoing, intensifying with then-Chief Executive Tung Chee-hwa's 1999 Green Policy Address. This needs to be recognised.

The Government has worked hard on co-operating at a regional level, and has maintained an appropriately strong local focus. On transport, it has overseen the conversion of all taxis from diesel to the cleaner LPG, and is encouraging the remainder of the minibus operators to make the same switch, or opt for electric vans. It is working with the franchised bus operators to retrofit early Euro models with particulate-reducing devices, and has pledged to help commercial operators upgrade to Euro IV vehicles. This has had some effect on reducing emissions at the roadside.

On power, the Government has banned the utilities from burning coal with more than 1% sulphur, is working with them to accelerate their retro-fitting of either flue-gas desulphurisation units or selective catalytic reduction equipment, and has a clear policy to progressively tighten total emission caps to attain 2010 targets. These are only a few examples of some high-profile issues. Data show lower levels of NOx,

volatile organic compounds, and respirable suspended particulates over the years. But the Government acknowledges a serious SO<sub>2</sub> problem.

Yet many are displeased. Many believe strongly that the Government is not doing enough to clean the air and, worse, that it lacks direction.

This leaves the government with no option: it must articulate its vision very clearly; it must outline its key policies across the board; it needs to recognise that there is still much to be done.

Yet, all the work cannot be foisted on the Government. Whilst improvements can be made in the transport and the power sectors, the demands placed on them by society for its daily needs continue to grow and we must find ways to urgently address this escalation.

This is the situation: the Government believes it has done as much as it can on air quality within the existing political tensions. It believes the public needs to engage properly for there to be further progress – with legislators, business leaders, and Government – and indicate what it is willing to support to clean the air.

Yes, in that sense the Government needs to do more. It must at least attend to these specific concerns, then go beyond its 2010 targets.

Yes, there needs to be individual sacrifice; we've heard that before.

What seems to be missing is a sleeve-rolling, no-nonsense authority that will recommend the tough action needed and support the Government to make the policy decisions and implement them. It needs to have the Chief Executive's mandate. Fresh from his electoral win, he has the legitimacy to work for the best interests of Hong Kong on air quality, and this means working to repair the damage to our reputation as a place of international business, to once again be the first choice of top talent, to turn around hardening perceptions that coming to Hong Kong means living with health problems because of the "third-rate air".

The Council began its air quality campaign last year as part of its wider mission of ensuring Hong Kong develops sustainably, with all the related quality-of-life benefits now and for the future. Its local focus is now at a crucial stage.

In May, the first city-wide engagement exercise on air quality starts to pull all the different strands of concern together. Through this exercise the Council hopes to present the discourse to all stakeholders freshly and clearly to help them see how they can influence the resuscitation of our air in very real ways.

The engagement will challenge us all to put aside self-interests. Demanding the Government to set air-quality policies that go beyond its efforts and goals requires change and sacrifice from all – and the results may take time. This engagement focuses on three issues: action to be taken on days of high pollution, road pricing, and demand side management.

Op-Ed submission for the SCMP

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The Council hopes that discussion will put Hong Kong in a better position to make some of those difficult choices: to ask the Government to do more for our skies, we must all be prepared to shoulder responsibility and not shirk our calling – taking part in the engagement process is a first step.

\* Dr Edgar Cheng is the vice-chairman of the Council for Sustainable Development. The 2006 report is at <http://www.susdev.gov.hk/html/en/council/BAQreport.pdf>, on the Council's website.