

## **Business for Clean Air**

A Joint Conference of the Project CLEAN AIR and Action Blue Sky

27 November 2006, 9:00 am-12:00 noon

JW Marriott Hotel, Pacific Place, Admiralty

### ***Business Leaders Forum***

***Dr. Edgar Cheng, Vice Chairman, Council for Sustainable Development***

## **Are we tackling air pollution the right way?**

All of us recognize the urgency of Hong Kong's problem with air quality. So I am especially encouraged today to hear from our Chief Executive, the Honorable Mr. Donald Tsang, his vision and action plan on air pollution. Let me take this opportunity to also congratulate the Chamber and the Business Coalition On The Environment (BCE) for drawing up the Clean Air Charter. I agree with the Chief Executive that if all the six bullet points are duly followed, the Charter will certainly effect a significant improvement in our air quality. The challenge is how to sustain such momentum and to get many, many more companies to sign up and to meet all the requirements of the Charter.

As Vice-Chairman of the Council for Sustainable Development (CSD), I have been given 3-5 minutes to talk to you about the Council Report on Better Air Quality (a 72 pages document). But before I attempt to do that, I think it is important for me to share with you some facts and some misconceptions about air quality in Hong Kong.

Everyone feels good when the sky is clear and blue. It is good for tourism and we get less complaints from the general public. But Clear does not mean Clean. When you check the Air Pollution Index (API) on a clear blue sky day, it is not always automatically low. For example, we have moments of clear blue sky over the weekend. But the General API on different parts of the city is medium, not low, between 44-46 and the Roadside API is high, between 64-80 with Mongkok registered the highest at 80. So Clear does not mean Clean.

The contribution to Regional air pollution is about 80% from the Pearl River Delta (PRD) and will get even higher in the future and 20% from Hong Kong (HK). But the contribution to local air pollution, reflected in high roadside API, is mainly generated by local transport sector and the local power utilities sector. In other words, we can blame the SMOG to both PRD and HK in the ratio of 80-20. But we in HK have to take a bigger responsibility on health hazard caused by air pollutants generated locally. Some of you might remember in the early 90's, the sulphur dioxide level in HK decreased drastically as a result of government requiring local power companies to use cleaner fuel. As a result of that action, the number of respiratory illnesses also decreased significantly. Spending \$51 billion to clean up HK will not necessarily guarantee clear blue sky but will definitely make the air we breathe locally cleaner and contribute to better health.

Now, in the remaining two minutes, I would like to point out that the emphasis of the Council Report on Better Air Quality is on how to combat local air pollution, not regional one, because first, we feel that there are a lot of things we can do locally and we need to do them urgently and it will definitely have major positive impact on our health. We also feel that it is important for us to clean our backyard as much as possible while our government is also working with our counterpart in the PRD on how to tackle the regional air pollution.

The Council put forward a total of 14 recommendations for the government to consider. These are important and significant ones involving issues at institutional level, as well as issues relevant to the electricity generation, transport and industry sectors. I would like to point out that the government has responded positively and promptly to our recommendations, such as issues about accelerating the retrofitting of particulate traps on franchised buses and phase out old versions and encourage the uptake of hybrid vehicles, etc.

The Council has also identified four areas that require further public engagement and consensus building. These include actions to be taken on days with a high Air Pollution Index, demand side management, banning idling vehicles and congestion charging mechanisms.

But does all these mean that our problems with local air pollution will be solved? We know our Chief Executive has been championing for better air quality, many leaders in the business sector and NGO sector have also done so. Today we are also seeing major commitments from both the government and business leaders together. Such partnership will go a long way in sustaining the much needed momentum of making air quality better. However, we are dealing with a very complex issue affecting many interest groups. There will be insurmountable barriers, especially when we consider the political reality we are facing today. Given the level of interest in the community and the actions that the government has taken so far, I am sure we will see progress. But is that sufficient? Should we have faster actions and bolder measures? I believe that the air quality issue is critical enough that we need to set up a high-level commission, staffed by technical experts from inside and outside of the government, working with business and political leaders in a more formal way, with specific tasks, targets and a timetable to clean up the sky. This way, we can galvanize the community, break down barriers and achieve the impossible. We have great leadership in the government, we are seeing today dedicated leadership in the business sector and we have countless leadership in the NGO sector. I believe this tripartite relationship, working together, can made the impossible possible.