

Reclamation project should be scaled down

TODAY is the deadline for settling the dispute between the government and the Society for the Protection of the Harbour. Failing an agreement between them, the dispute over the Central reclamation project may have to be resolved by litigation. Actually, the common ground between them outweighs their differences. The government, having reviewed the situation, agrees that it permits of a concession. Furthermore, the Hong Kong Institute of Engineers has put forward a new proposal. If the government squarely faces the problem, it can reduce the reclamation area and need not halt the project or fight the court battle to the end.

The government plans to reclaim 18 hectares from Victoria Harbour. The Society for the Protection of the Harbour is not against reclaiming land for building a bypass, but it says 8 hectares would suffice. A government source says a review of the project shows the amount by which the total area could be reduced is only half a hectare. Groups and people that cherish Victoria Harbour have with their perseverance compelled the government to reconsider whether the area is the minimum needed. Their efforts are commendable. Some groups have however threatened to go to extremes - to try and block contractors' vessels. It is unnecessary and quite dangerous to do so. Hong Kong has an independent judiciary. The dispute over the reclamation project ought to be resolved by lawful means.

The focus of the controversy is whether the reclamation project is in keeping with the three principles the court has derived from its interpretation of the Protection of the Harbour Ordinance, especially that of keeping impairment to the harbour to the minimum. The government concedes that 0.5 hectare at the eastern end of it can be given up. However, little can be sacrificed in the middle section because pump houses and a People's Liberation Army naval berth must be built there. As for its western end, it seems possible to reduce the area for a new Star Ferry Pier.

According to the government's plan, the Star Ferry

will provide services as usual when work is in progress. It therefore has planned to reclaim a piece of land 120 metres from the existing pier for its relocation. Moreover, if the pier is relocated where the outlying district service pier is, the waterfront line will be tidier and it will be easier to build a replica of it.

However, Hong Kong Institute of Engineer president Alex Chan (who also sits on the Town Planning Board) has pointed out that it is open to the government to have a temporary pier built for the Star Ferry. In his view, if it does so, a far smaller area will be required. The option is technically feasible. There will be no problem if the public would live with a waterfront line that is not exactly tidy. As professionals take such a view, the government cannot very well adhere to its original plan, otherwise it will have difficulty satisfying the court that the proposed area is the minimum required.

The Society for the Protection of the Harbour also demands that the government immediately suspend all work until the court passes its ruling. It is worried that the work might cause irreparable impairment to the harbour. However, the government contends that what is going on is dredging, which must be done no matter how many hectares will eventually be reclaimed and which has no bearing on litigation. It has also suggested that halting the work would delay the project and lead to pecuniary losses. It is easy to tackle this matter. To dispel the Society's worry, the government only needs to pledge itself not to allow reclamation to begin until the court has ruled on the question of reclamation area.

Victoria Harbour is a symbol of the SAR. The more land is reclaimed from it, the narrower it will become. It is generally considered essential to protect Victoria Harbour. The government must not carry out any reclamation project unless it is absolutely necessary to do so. The public would rather there was no tidy waterfront line or huge promenade. The government ought to respect the public's wishes and scale down the Central reclamation project.