

Speech by PSHA at the Joint Zonta Public Affairs Forum (English only)

Following is the speech titled "The development of the West Kowloon Cultural District in the context of the cultural landscape of Hong Kong" delivered by the Permanent Secretary for Home Affairs, Mr Raymond Young, today (February 22) at the Joint Zonta Public Affairs Forum of the Zonta Club of Hong Kong and Zonta Club of Hong Kong Two:

Ladies and gentlemen,

I wish to thank you very much for inviting me to address this Zonta gathering today. It is both an honour and delight on my part. I have chosen the West Kowloon Cultural District (WKCD) development as the topic of my address not because WKCD has been in the news recently, perhaps for the wrong reason, but because we are now at the cusp of a critical stage of this development, which is the single most important piece of arts and cultural infrastructure ever undertaken in Hong Kong, or in the world. The "wrong reason" I alluded to refers, of course, to the resignation of the WKCD Authority's CEO Graham Sheffield after only a few months in post. I just wish to assure you that his departure, though unforeseen and very much regretted, has not affected the work of the Authority as much as people may tend to believe, because a competent management team is already in post to make sure that the critical milestones are not missed.

We will reach an important milestone when the Authority meets next week to decide on the choice of the conceptual plan for the WKCD. In fact, the findings of a public engagement exercise on which of the three conceptual plans the public most prefer will be announced in a few days' time. On the basis of the chosen conceptual plan, a more detailed development plan will be drawn up which, if accepted by the Town Planning Board towards the end of this year, will become the statutory town plan for the whole district. We can expect that tendering for the first facility may start before the middle of next year, and proposals will be invited for the iconic architectural design for the key cultural venues like the Concert Hall and the Museum, around the same time.

According to the planned phasing of this 40-hectare development, a suite of 12 facilities, including a Concert Hall, the Great Theatre, the Xiqu Centre, four Blackbox Theatres, the Chamber Music Hall, a Medium-sized Theatre, a Mega Performance Venue, the M+ and an exhibition centre, will be completed in the first phase, which is

between 2015 to 2020, with another Great Theatre and 3 other Medium-sized theatres to be completed in Phase 2. Construction of cultural hardware on this scale has never taken place anywhere else in the world. In terms of performing arts venues, WKCD will bring a 50% increase on the 28 venues we now have in the whole of Hong Kong.

This brings to mind a number of questions: is this a risky business? Many other cultural districts elsewhere have developed and evolved organically over a long period of time - what makes us believe we can leap-frog this process in Hong Kong? Will there be a big enough audience base to fill all those seats? Will there be a critical mass of art groups and performers to produce enough quality programmes to make these venues viable? What will become of the facilities that we now have under the management of Government? These are all very pertinent questions. Contrary to the popular belief that Hong Kong people are not very culturally oriented and too materialistic in their lifestyle to pay any attention to the arts, we do have a burgeoning arts scene here and the Government is determined to do its best to help Hong Kong become a culturally vibrant and diverse metropolitan city, befitting its economic success in other areas. The value contributed by our cultural and creative industries makes up around 4% of our GDP, a decent number but one which still has much room to grow; our annual Hong Kong Arts Festival is now an established brand name event and a big draw to visitors from around the region; and we are now a major centre in the region for the trading and auctioning of Asian art, in particular Chinese art. Cantonese opera is more popular and commercially vibrant in Hong Kong than in any other parts of China.

Again contrary to popular belief, we are now suffering a serious shortage of performing arts venues. As for the 15 managed by the Government, their average booking rates are consistently above 90%, anyone who has the experience of booking the Cultural Centre, City Hall or Hong Kong Coliseum would know how difficult it is to obtain a booking as these venues are operating at full capacity. This shortage poses a serious constraint on Hong Kong's development as a centre for the arts as, for instance, we have had to turn away a lot of Broadway musical shows (like the Lion King) because such shows are long-running and we just don't have the slots for them. Many burgeoning art groups find it difficult to compete with the more established groups for performing venues, and this does not bode well for the longer term development of performing arts. According to the independent market analysis commissioned by the WKCD Authority earlier, the audience base in Hong Kong will be expanding gradually so that by the time the various new cultural facilities are completed, they can be assured of positive demand in terms of patronage and

bookings. It is envisaged that apart from the local audience pool, WKCD will be able to tap into a wider audience base of the Pearl River Delta and beyond, with the convenient connection through the Express Rail Link, the terminus of which is situated right next to the WKCD.

This rather sanguine projection however predicates on one important condition: that we do not sit still now. Building hardware is always easier than building the software that runs it. We are placing a great emphasis on arts education, and the new secondary school curriculum will significantly increase the students' exposure to the arts, helping to round out their education and preparing those with the right talent and aptitude to pursue a career in the arts in the future. The Leisure and Culture Services Department through its Arts Promotion Office is now doing much more to bring arts to the broader community - you will be seeing many more art installations and live performances in our public parks and local performing venues in the years to come. We really need to raise the general level of arts appreciation in the broader community, so that the nightly entertainment for the average family would no longer just be the soap operas on TV, and a typical day out for the family might include a visit to the museum. We will be launching a Community Art Promotion Project; Artists in the Neighbourhood Programme and Community Cultural Ambassador Scheme which supports local performing arts practitioners to conduct creative outreach arts projects at various indoor and outdoor venues and Arts Experience Scheme for senior secondary students. With enhanced publicity and a more popularised approach, our museum exhibitions have lately become more visible to the general public - one can see more advertisements in the printed media and on public transport, and exhibitions like the "Along the River During the Qingming Festival" managed to attract record crowds.

We have increased funding for the nine major performing companies (the Government now directly supports financially the Hong Kong Philharmonic and Hong Kong Chinese Orchestra etc), the Academy for Performing Arts, and the Arts Development Council, and will shortly be introducing a new funding scheme to strengthen the capacity of small and medium sized art groups, hopefully helping some of them achieve commercial success and financial independence eventually. One success factor in the sophisticated arts scene in Europe and the US is the generous contribution from the private sector. This is sadly lacking in Hong Kong, where only a handful of big corporations or individuals are contributing significantly to the arts, and only the more established art groups like the Hong Kong Philharmonic or Arts Festival are able to attract such donations. Therefore one element of the new funding

scheme is to encourage the corporate sector to support the arts - we are thinking of matching private contributions with Government funds at a ratio higher than 1:1. If the major performing venues in WKCD were to have their own resident companies which are home-grown, the nine major performing companies would just not be enough to go around, so it's important to groom as many of the middle-ranking groups as possible to become "majors" and as soon as possible.

It is also very important that we have a sufficient number of home grown arts administrators who will manage the new facilities in the WKCD and also the many art groups which will hopefully emerge in the future, and we also need curators for our new museums and galleries. The universities have now all got the message, and are providing an increasing number of arts-related sub-degree, undergraduate and post-graduate courses. This reflects there is a demand out there for these courses, and a realisation that a degree in such disciplines is able to command market value. And more importantly, parents nowadays are more enlightened than parents of our generation in allowing their children to pursue a career in the arts.

All in all the Government is spending close to \$3 billion every year on arts and culture, representing 1% of total Government spending, excluding capital works projects. Of course there is never an adequate level of funding for the arts, if you ask the arts community. Casting our eyes on the funding models in other developed economies, the high level of Government support for the arts that we have in Hong Kong is not common among them, except perhaps in France. As I said, we could use much more private funding in Hong Kong for the arts. Developing a vibrant private market for the arts is a long process, and the Government in the meantime has the responsibility to provide the necessary support to arts development, sustaining the smaller art groups and artists, before we can say we are a truly mature city in terms of arts and culture development. But we do have a lot going for us in Hong Kong and I am confident that with the gradual completion of the WKCD development, we will be way ahead of other places in this region, and the most cosmopolitan city in the whole of China in our artistic and cultural outlook.

Thank you very much.

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