

Speech by CE at 9th Global Conference of the Alliance for Healthy Cities webinar (English only)

Following is the speech by the Chief Executive, Mrs Carrie Lam, at the 9th Global Conference of the Alliance for Healthy Cities webinar today (November 3):

Thank you very much, Donald. It's a pleasure to be able to share some views on healthy cities, especially in the planning stage. The Healthy Cities movement was initiated by the World Health Organization in 1986 to cope with the adverse effects of an urban environment over health. The cities are encouraged under this initiative to incorporate health issues and health concerns into all aspects of public policy. That's why I'm very delighted to know that this is not just a gathering of health professionals, but we have architects, planners, engineers taking part because the planning aspect is so important to building a healthy city.

As I mentioned in my welcoming remarks, I took part in the sixth edition organised also by Hong Kong back in 2014. I dug out my speech – in fact I used a PowerPoint seven years ago – to read last evening, and I reminded myself that on that occasion I shared the Hong Kong story in building a healthy city, covering a wide range of subjects such as healthcare with emphasis on primary healthcare, school education with emphasis on physical education, air quality, public housing and building an age-friendly environment. I would say that these policy components for a healthy city are still very important today. But under the changing circumstances that we have seen in the past seven years, I would advocate that each of those components has taken on a new dimension and additional challenges. For example, when we now talk about primary healthcare, we need to tackle issues that were not there seven years ago such as the prevalence of alternative tobacco products, that's why it is duty-bound for each government to take stock of the health challenges and respond. I'm very gratified that through the efforts of many of us in the Government, our Legislative Council members and important bodies like the Hong Kong Council on Smoking and Health as well as education parties, we have introduced a piece of legislation to ban e-cigarettes altogether just recently in Hong Kong. This will bring a lot of health benefits especially to our younger generation.

Talking about school education, seven years ago, I talked about physical education – more sports, more activities – but now I believe the greatest challenge in school education is the mental health of our students. This is a concern that, again, my Government has taken on by establishing a high-level committee on the promotion of mental health. And more recently, in order to relieve the stresses on school children because of the absence of face-to-face learning for a very long time, the Advisory Committee on Mental Health will need to take on new activities and new promotions in order for the

students to regain their mental health.

Air quality goals today take on a new dimension. It's not just about clean air, it's about reducing carbon emission in light of the climate change challenges. Right now, the COP26 is still in progress. It is incumbent on every government to take concerted efforts to reduce carbon emission. My Government has pledged that we will reach carbon neutrality before the year 2050 in my Policy Address last November. And this year, soon after my 2021 Policy Address, the Secretary for the Environment has released the Hong Kong's Climate Action Plan 2050 and we have set for ourselves a midterm goal of 2035, at which time we hope to reduce carbon emission by 50 per cent as compared to the base year of 2005.

This Climate Action Plan again requires concerted efforts of almost everyone in the city because it is about reducing the use of energy, it is about using less fuel-driven cars and buying more electric vehicles. And most important of all, it is about managing waste. Municipal waste is a big problem in Hong Kong. I don't think we could afford to set aside any more land for landfill. We must recycle and reduce waste at source.

Talking about public housing, this continues to be an issue that is haunting Hong Kong, and more so than seven years ago, if you judge by the average waiting time of more than five years for a public rental flat by the community. But more importantly, in a city like Hong Kong, public housing or subsidised housing provided by the Government has taken on a new dimension as one of the most effective poverty alleviation measures. If we could solve the housing problem for the people of Hong Kong, I would say that by and large we have effectively addressed the poverty issue.

On ageing, we'd love to see old people living longer years, but the challenge is how we could add life to those more years, so that elderly people are living not only healthily, both physically and mentally, but also without the sense of isolation. It's always very sad to see the singleton elderly staying most of the time in their flat. Encouraging the elderly to lead an active ageing life, doing more exercise, maybe doing some volunteer work, is also one of the challenges that every healthy city has to embrace.

Now I will not have time to go into each of those aspects that will contribute to a healthy city, but instead I want to talk about how we could start to build a healthy city at the beginning. Many of the measures that I have just covered, seven years ago and now, are remedial in nature because the urban environment is already there so you can only make it more universally accessible, you can also build more health centres and so on. But healthy cities should actually be built at the planning stage. I have announced a major city-building initiative in my 2021 Policy Address, that is the Northern Metropolis. The northern part of Hong Kong is now being transformed gradually into what I will describe as a Northern Metropolis. It accounts for 300 square kilometres of the landmass of Hong Kong, that is about 30 per cent, because Hong Kong is a city of about a 1 110 square kilometres. It will house ultimately a population of 2.5 million, that is about one-third of our current 7.5 million population. Now that we have a

chance to build an entirely new city, a metropolis, how do we make sure that the various aspects of a healthy city are being enshrined or incorporated in the planning stage? That goes back to the original mission in 1986 when we had this healthy cities movement. The then objective was to encourage the city governments to incorporate the health issues and the health concerns in building a city.

First of all, under the Northern Metropolis Development Strategy, we made it very clear that in this metropolis there should be adequate provision of jobs in order to achieve a better home-job balance. From time to time, on a working day, when I am driven from the urban area where I live into the new development areas to attend a meeting, to officiate at a function, I will always see the buses coming the other way, that is from the new development areas into the urban areas, and the majority of passengers on the bus are falling asleep. You just imagine, if we have more jobs in the areas where these people live, they will have an extra hour of quality sleep at home and not on the bus.

So one of the primary objectives of the Northern Metropolis is we would try to make sure, for the first time in Hong Kong's new town development, that it will be self-contained. We are planning 650 000 jobs in the Northern Metropolis, and these are only jobs on the Hong Kong side. The Northern Metropolis is only a stone's throw away from the booming city of Shenzhen. By enhancing connectivity between Hong Kong and Shenzhen, actually many of the people living in the Northern Metropolis in the future could commute to Shenzhen to work, which will take them far less time than commuting back to the urban environment, that is what we call the Harbour Metropolis on both sides of Victoria Harbour. A better home-job balance, apart from reducing time and the fatigue in commuting that I have just described to you, will allow more quality time to be spent with the family, with the kids especially. That will also help to build a healthy family, both physically and mentally.

In order to create these jobs in the Northern Metropolis, we have announced that in the Northern Metropolis, land will be set aside for businesses that will have a better prospect to create jobs. For example, the Northern Metropolis will be driven by the innovation and technology industry. Apart from R&D (research and development) facilities in the Northern Metropolis, we have set aside 150 hectares of land in an area called San Tin to become a technopole like Silicon Valley. A lot of start-ups and manufacturing could go into this San Tin Technopole, so as to create the jobs. I have also announced that I will relocate government offices and government facilities which are not location-specific into the Northern Metropolis. Many of the civil servants in the future will have to work in the Northern Metropolis, and that will actually help to reduce the traffic flow that we are seeing today, every day – in the morning peak hours it's north to south, in the evening peak hours it's south to north.

The second aspect of building a healthy city, using the Northern Metropolis as an example, is to adequately provide mass transit early, and basically in Hong Kong, it will be railway. In one shot, I have announced

that we will have five railway projects in the Northern Metropolis, this is again to reduce the time to commute and the need to drive. Although Hong Kong is one of the cities which are highly efficient in public transport, with public transport accounting for 90 per cent of the daily passenger trips, we still have a pretty large fleet of private cars, and in recent years, the number of new private cars is also growing. How we could reduce the need to drive is by building mass transit at the very beginning, instead of leaving these rail projects to be built when there is so-called sufficient population intake into a particular district or estate in the Northern Metropolis. Three of these rail projects I have just described will be cross-border. They will facilitate residents in the Northern Metropolis to commute to various parts of Shenzhen, across the Shenzhen River, to take up employment.

The third aspect is providing adequate living and public space for people living in the Northern Metropolis. The reason why we are planning 2.5 million intake when Hong Kong's population will unlikely expand by 30 to 40 per cent in the next 20 years, is we have adopted higher standards, higher per capita space standards for people's accommodation, government institutional community facilities, as well as public open space. I really want to see Hong Kong people living more spaciouly and their children having more public space to enjoy, and more sports and arts facilities in the Northern Metropolis. Even with the experience of COVID-19, we have seen that sports facilities, whether they are open-air playgrounds or indoor sports facilities, have become a very important component of our infection control and COVID-19 strategy. Otherwise, where on earth could we find all these community vaccination centres, community testing centres, with sufficient queuing distance for people to maintain social distance? A more generous provision of public space, open space and sports facilities actually will contribute to combating a public health crisis, although I don't hope we will have another one like COVID-19.

Another component is a better urban-rural integration. The northern part of the New Territories is full of natural resources. We have wetland, fishponds, country parks, and we have the Shenzhen River. Instead of just going for intense urbanisation, which was Hong Kong's approach previously, on this occasion we are very serious about achieving better urban-rural integration. Apart from the global Ramsar Site, which is our Mai Po wetland on the western part of this Northern Metropolis, and the world Geopark (Hong Kong UNESCO Global Geopark) on the eastern side of the Northern Metropolis, we will create three new wetlands with a size of 2 000 hectares in the Northern Metropolis, and we will also install a new country park on the eastern side of this Northern Metropolis. To do this, it's not just a matter of planning. Of course, we can draw up plans and zoning for that purpose, but experience tells us that we need a far more proactive conservation policy in order to achieve that objective, so for the first time, the Hong Kong SAR Government has pledged that we will resume land. We will resume private land in order to create this integral country park as well as wetland parks for the people of Hong Kong.

Another initiative is we would love people to walk more, to drive less, to cycle more. Creating outdoor eco-recreation tourism space is also a

guiding principle in the Northern Metropolis, and we will create this space with high landscape value. In the past, Hong Kong is very famous with a lot of country parks and mountain trails, but in the Northern Metropolis, since we are talking about better urban-rural integration, we are very ambitious. We want to create an urban-rural greenway that will take people from the mountainside right into the urban area, and enjoying the scene along the way, because the Northern Metropolis also has a lot of heritage, which will have to be preserved for the people to enjoy.

In the course of building the Northern Metropolis, as I have mentioned about the climate change challenges and the goal to reach carbon zero by the year 2050, we will incorporate the use of clean energy, low carbon emission zones and climate change resilience and mitigation, smart city concepts in planning and building the infrastructure with a view to fully implementing the sponge city concept in the Northern Metropolis.

After all, we are building healthy cities for the people, so the final component in the Northern Metropolis, which is very important, is to make this community a sustainable one for living and working through public engagement. At every stage of the process of building the Northern Metropolis, we will engage the public, we will discuss with the people what they want to see. Wherever possible, we will entrust the management of the wetland parks and those heritage buildings to non-governmental organisations, just like the World Wide Fund for Nature Hong Kong which is now the manager of the Ramsar Site – Mai Po wetland. The Government doesn't need to do everything. We will work with the non-government sector in delivering some of these projects that we would very much like to see.

Finally, I mentioned that I hate to see elderly or disadvantaged people suffering from social isolation. In the Northern Metropolis, enhancing community support and neighbourhood solidarity is also one of the themes. This is our vision for the Northern Metropolis of Hong Kong and I am confident that through concerted efforts, we will build a liveable, healthy and happy city for our future generation. Thank you very much.