
'1997 problem 'is imaginary'

The expiration of the New Territories lease in 1997 has been called an "imaginary problem" by the Secretary for the New Territories, Mr David Akers-Jones.

Speaking at the Public Affairs Research Centre of the Chinese University, Mr Akers-Jones said yesterday that the importance of the 1997 date has been greatly over-rated.

"Many people argue that as we draw closer to 1997, private development will dwindle and Government development programmes will not be sustainable," he said.

The facts do not bear out that argument, said the Secretary.

"Firstly, 1997 has no place in our public development strategy, and private investment in the New Territories has never been so great," he said.

"Moreover, there is mounting rather than diminishing interest in development of all kinds."

It is true that some overseas investors may be disturbed by their difficulty in understanding Hongkong's unique circumstances, said the Secretary.

But local investors have no such problem, he said.

"Almost all our residential, commercial and industrial real estate is developed by local people who understand and are reassured by the present situation."

Local confidence is particularly bolstered by recent encouragement of development schemes for Shumchun.

The Shumchun development is an example of the kind of long-term co-operation that Hongkong and China can be considering, he said.

He added that the past 18 months have seen a remarkable growth in development

dialogue between Hongkong and the mainland.

"Who would have thought 18 months ago that I would be spending a Sunday morning travelling round the New Territories, visiting all the new towns with the governor of Kwangtung?" he asked.

Now people are asking about the concrete details of co-operation in administering and servicing the Shumchun development, he said, adding:

"Eighteen months ago no one would have thought of asking such a question.

"Considering we started off with a blank sheet 18 months ago and the sheet is quite full now with any number of interesting things, I think that's rather remarkable."

Mr Akers-Jones said that in any case the development of the New Territories will have to go on.

"To put it simply, more people require more housing and more housing needs more land."

That land is available in the New Territories, he said, and it will have to be used and used wisely.

He noted that in the process of development, problems with urban sprawl and maintaining a healthy community spirit will also have to be faced.

"I think the village life, like we saw in Shatin and Tsun Wan, will disappear," he said.

"But there is no reason we shouldn't build another kind of community culture to replace it.

"To sum up," he said, "we are not short of land or ideas.

"It is more a question of whether we have the capacity in financial, in economic, in manpower and material terms to do more than we are doing at the moment."
