A tale of two cities

Hong Kong and Shenzhen have much to learn from Vancouver, top, and Seattle. TNS

Out of the Box

Tony Chan Fan-cheong is president of the Hong Kong University of Science and Technology. He has spent his life pursuing his dreams relating to teaching and research, and has unique views on education, scientific and technological development, and nurturing the young.

In today’s globalized world, many countries and cities have found it more beneficial to cooperate than to compete with each other, by leveraging each other’s comparative advantages.

I recently came across an article in The New York Times about such a partnership between Vancouver and Seattle and found that the situation has a lot in common with that of Hong Kong and Shenzhen.

Vancouver and Seattle are no strangers to many in Hong Kong; the former being a popular immigration destination before 1997 (and great Chinese food today), and the latter being known for hosting the head offices of Microsoft, Amazon and Starbucks.

But these days, Vancouver wants to get into tech and Seattle is facing a shortage of talents.

While the two cities are only some 225 kilometers apart, traffic between them has always been heavy, and the national border has kept them further apart than their geographical proximities suggest.

But now leaders of both cities see ways in which their populations can complement each other well; for Seattle, Vancouver has an open immigration policy that makes hiring of the world’s top talent easy; while for Vancouver, Seattle provides the tech know-how and the source of capital that the city lacks.

Seattle is already trying to catch up on its talent shortage. In September, the University of Washington, Tsinghua University and Microsoft kicked off the Global Innovation Exchange, where students from both China and the United States will pursue degrees in science and innovation. It is Tsinghua’s first foray into North America, and I see this as a sign for many similar projects to come.

But hefty housing costs prove to be a big obstacle in Vancouver’s drive to embrace science and innovation. It was recently ranked the third most unaffordable city in the world, after Hong Kong and Sydney.

To combat soaring land prices, British Columbia imposed a 15 percent tax on new home purchases in the Vancouver area by foreign buyers. It seems to be working: the total number of homes sold in the area in August fell, and the surge in prices has slowed.

Challenges remain, but both cities are thinking hard on how to bring them closer to each other. For starters, the University of British Columbia plans to deepen ties between Seattle and Vancouver—including more collaboration between the university and the University of Washington on the research front.

Measures are also being considered to shorten the travel distance and time between Vancouver and Seattle; there have been plans to build a high-speed railway, and to create a dedicated lane for autonomous vehicles in the Interstate 5 highway.

I see much parallel between the development of Seattle and Vancouver to that of Hong Kong and Shenzhen. Like Vancouver’s renowned UBC, Hong Kong has excellent universities, which are as good, if not better; and the two cities also share the problem of high land prices, which has crippled our effort to bring in more IT start-ups.

Shenzhen, like Seattle, has many budding start-ups and tech firms, which would find much use for Hong Kong’s international talent pool.

And Hong Kong and Shenzhen are geographically much closer to each other than Seattle and Vancouver; we are only one hour’s drive apart, and the high-speed railway network, which is set to open soon, will bring our cities much closer than ever.

I have traveled both corridors multiple times and can attest that the local one is much easier to navigate. But legalities and politics can stand in the way—witness the difficulty of getting an efficient border control checkpoint on the high-speed rail between Hong Kong and Shenzhen whereas Canada and the United States have had such a scheme for years.

Hong Kong and Shenzhen are already working closely on many fronts. By leveraging Hong Kong’s many advantages—excellent universities, internationality, mature legal system and efficient infrastructures—with Shenzhen’s technology prowess and access to the Chinese market, we have the potential to create a greater tech corridor than Vancouver-Seattle.

Hong Kong and Shenzhen also have the advantage of being “one country.” We must not let politics get in our way if we are to aim for greatness. As the old Chinese saying goes: “You can’t clap with one hand only.” Now is the time to act.