In the loop for tech

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.

I FIRST HEARD about the Lok Ma Chau Loop when I took up my position at HKUST in 2009.

It was listed in the top 10 most important infrastructure projects of the government, intending to become a hub for academic research, innovation and technology, and culture related industries. Soon after, though, the project faded into obscurity, and many, including myself, lamented that it was an opportunity missed.

To my pleasant surprise, our government announced last week that the Loop project is a go.

In fact, it has become a legal part of Hong Kong, and Hong Kong regulations will apply.

From the perspective of a long-time advocate for closer Hong Kong-Shenzhen ties in the IT front, the loop is an intriguing project. I sincerely hope the project will bring the advantages of Hong Kong — rule of law, low tax, free flow of information, and those of Shenzhen — a world-class manufacturing ecosystem, and a thriving innovation and technology culture, together to form a formidable alliance.

While there is wide support for this development, however, there are already skeptics who worry the project will end up becoming another all-too-familiar tale of infrastructure-turned-real estate. Or that it will become a “Trojan horse” for mainland companies and workers to come to Hong Kong to compete.

It is hence welcoming that our leaders have emphasized that the loop will be dedicated to innovation and technology alone.

Obviously, there are still things waiting to be sorted out, in order for the loop to be a success. For starters, both governments will have to find a solution to facilitate customs and immigration, and our government’s suggestion of adapting an APEC Card-like scheme is certainly worth consideration. Some in Hong Kong may feel the loop is simply too remote from central Hong Kong, but if we look from the perspective of promoting collaboration between Hong Kong and Shenzhen, it is actually an ideal spot.

I do have a few personal comments of the few announced details.

It is said that the first phase of the project will be completed in 7½ years. To be honest, that sounds way too long! For time is the essence in the world of IT.

Another point is that, while I agree that the four focus areas of robotics, bio-medicine, smart city and financial technology are hot subjects today, we must also realize that the world today is changing rapidly, and that we should not limit ourselves to only those topics that we know now. Nobody, including the government, has a crystal ball for the future. Silicon Valley does not have a top-down mandated focus.

The role of the government should be on creating the right environment and ecosystem so that innovative companies, venture capital and global talents will congregate and create the future bottom-up.

Patience and time should have priority over short-term gains.

We must also not make the loop as a privileged and selected area for international enterprises only. We should remember to also invest in ourselves so that we will become stronger in the future.

In my view, Hong Kong homegrown talents are just as innovative and creative as their counterparts elsewhere, but our public has long lacked confidence in them to chase their dreams and compete globally. Our universities have become globally recognized for innovation and technology.

With careful planning and proper incentives, the loop has the potential to be the breeding ground for a new generation of homegrown IT talent in Hong Kong, but first we must believe in ourselves and muster the courage to mount a challenge.

We in the tertiary education front certainly have much to do and contribute to make that a reality.

In my columns last week, I wished Hong Kong would increase funding fundamental research at universities, provide additional support for knowledge transfer and entrepreneurship, and relax regulations to attract talents and funding, with a vision of making Hong Kong into an innovation and technology hub of Asia.

Serendipitously, it seems that we are already off to a flying start.