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Economic benefits of bridge linking Hong Kong, Zhuhai and Macau could be huge, experts tell debate

Debate hears spin-offs from snag-hit HK\$117 billion project could be huge

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The massive 42km bridge linking Hong Kong, Zhuhai and Macau is on the road to success despite delays and problems with the drifting of an artificial island in the Hong Kong construction sector, a debate on the project heard yesterday.

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Kong debate asked whether the bridge is an expensive white elephant or a cash cow.

Allen Ha Wing-on, a member of Lantau Development Advisory Committee and chief executive of AsiaWorld-Expo, said the bridge could turn Lantau Island into a tourism and business hub with potential to create jobs for the residents of Tung Chung.

Stephen Wong Yuen-shan, an adjunct university economics lecturer of the Chinese University of Hong Kong said: "The bridge is the hardware, it's not the silver bullet to solve every problem we have. But, it's better to have it than not."

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According to the Highways Department, the city is expected to pay more than HK\$117 billion for the entire bridge project.

About 40 per cent of that HK\$117 billion, or HK\$46 billion, will go towards the construction of the Tuen Mun-Chek Lap Kok Link, an alternative land route to access to Hong Kong International Airport.

Construction of the main bridge started in 2009 and was originally due for completion in 2016. However, "technical difficulties" have delayed the project and no official date has been given for its actual completion.

"No way is it a white elephant," said Yim Kin-ping, past chairman of the civil division of the Hong Kong Institution of Engineers.

Yim described the fact that a specially built artificial island near the airport had moved up to seven metres out of place due to a new dredging method as "a small hiccup in a big project".

The problematic new dredging method had been tweaked and was now operating properly.

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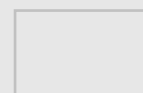
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Yim added the success of Oresund Bridge linking Denmark and Sweden showed people would travel on it and would benefit users from all three places in the Pearl River Delta region.

Dr Donald Li Kwok-tung, chairman of the Bauhinia Foundation Research Centre, said: "To connect Hong Kong to western Pearl River Delta within three hours cannot be wrong because you are facilitating flow of people, cargo and trade."

However, Andrew Kinloch, an infrastructure finance adviser, expressed doubts over the cost-benefits of the bridge.

"Most freight goes by sea, takes a day or two. That is perfectly okay," said Kinloch.

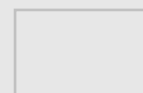
" Air freight will benefit from this bridge. But, there are six airports [in the region]. Does something manufactured in Zhuhai really need to come through Hong Kong airport?"

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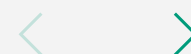
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