Int'l experts weigh in on Tainan's city planning

The China Post supplement writer

Since the merger of Tainan city and county into the special municipality known as Greater Tainan, the new city government faces many challenges ahead, governing the consolidated region, especially in terms of city planning.

To glean insight from international bodies, the city government invited a meeting with experts from the International Urban Development Association, formerly known as the International New Town Association, from March 30 to April 1 in Tainan.

The seven experts, including Secretary-General Michel Sudarans, arrived in Taiwan on April 29, where Tainan Mayor William Lai and other city government officials welcomed them.

Lai is the first mayor of the consolidated Greater Tainan. In his speech welcoming the experts, he explained to them Tainan's rich cultural history, with over 300 years as Taiwan's capital city. Lai added that he hoped the special guests would be able to get to know the region and offer advice regarding its future development.

Tainan City Deputy-Mayor Yen Chun-tzu said that the merger put the city government in charge of 2,200 square kilometers, with a population of 1.87 million people. This is a huge responsibility, especially as there are large areas of agricultural land that require management and planning, Yen said.

Sudarans, who is on his second visit to Taiwan, expressed great hope for the future of the region. The first challenge the new city government may need to overcome is to know that pleasing the majority may result in a loss of balance in terms of city development, he said.

People living in the area of Greater Tainan will have to learn to live with these structural changes, especially when the divide between city and county no longer exists. This will affect the city's development, agricultural renewal, water resources, transportation, culture, local economy and architecture, Sudarans explained.

The seven other guests include urban experts Lawrence Earle, David Kepis, Paul Gernsiek, Takashi Goto and Hwang Yu Ning.

1. Tainan Mayor William Lai shakes hands with International Urban Development Association Secretary-General Michel Sudarans.
2. The group of experts stroll around the Canal Star-Light urban renewal region before crossing the Jin-Hua Bridge.
3. Members from the group visit Chulan tower in Tainan City.
Tainan to thrive merging cultural past with tech future

By LYNN LIN
The China Post

The Greater Tainan area must integrate its rich cultural past with the future of its high-tech and new media industry to ensure urban, cultural and economic development in the vast consolidated area, domestic and international experts concluded yesterday at the "International Conference of New Metropolitan Synergies" held in Tainan.

The consolidation of Tainan City and Tainan County into one municipality on Dec. 25 last year has created opportunities and challenges alike. Facing this huge task is incumbent Tainan Mayor William Lai, who welcomed a roundtable of experts to provide in-depth assessments of the region over a three-day period, from March 30 to April 1.

Seven members of the nonprofit International Urban Development Association, formerly known as the International New Town Association (INTA), weighed in on issues that arise with large metropolitan governance, including administrative structure, border control, resource integration and identifying sustainable development.

During the conference, city government leaders touched upon existing issues plaguing their sectors while presenting their goals for new policies, which varied between visionary idealism and pragmatic efficiency.

The result was often innovative and surprising directions for development and sustainability, as illustrated by Yeh Jie-shan of the Cultural Affairs Bureau, who proposed to turn Tainan into Taiwan's Hollywood.

Citing the area's rich traditions and good, year-round weather, Yeh said enacting a Tainan Government Film Development Center would be a great way to increase creative job opportunities while promoting the local art and film industry.

However, INTA Secretary-general Michel Sudarskis, who also served as moderator, warned of risks inherent in the film sector, citing movie industries in Italy, Korea, Dubai and France as those that, while successful, also suffered losses while competing with powerful Hollywood.

Instead, Sudarskis proposed that Tainan focus on creating one-of-a-kind festivals that merge tradition with a unique travel experience.

The need to create jobs that attract Tainan's youth was echoed throughout the conference. The roundtable of experts concurred that the "brain drain" of educated and skilled young adults leaving the south for Taipei or overseas is an ongoing issue.

Sudarskis urged the city government to create attractive jobs that may retain the demographic, which is especially the region's future.

Tai Chi Goto, Principal of Japan's Fukuoka Urban Laboratory, drew parallels between Japan and Taiwan in general and Fukuoka and Tainan in particular.

Using the devastating tsunami in Japan as an example, Goto said the destruction impeded a pertinent segment of Japan's technological sector, which resulted in supply problems for Apple's iPad 2.

"Tainan also needs to create value in the industrial chain that can be a part of the global economy," Goto said, an "ingredient" that cannot be replaced by others.

Chien Hsu, CEO of Ching Fu World Goods Co., believed that for a region to thrive, it should not aim to be followers of global trends as dictated by other cultures, as it will always fall behind as an imitator.

Using the example of the Luxury market, Hsu described the manufacture of luxury goods and quality goods -- a foreign concept and expertise -- versus that of computers -- a thriving local industry.

A computer takes many minds and manpower to create and assemble, yet the end product costs an average of NT$30,000, Hsu said. Luxury bags, on the other hand, require much less to produce, yet can easily sell for over NT$30,000. This calls for a re-association of our cultural and creative assets and how to present them to the world, he added.

Many of the experts agreed that the keys to Tainan's future were to create its own value chain by focusing on its culture -- local and creative industry -- high tech development and new media.

There is a need to integrate Tainan's rich historical culture with its great industrial tradition, said Lawrence Barth, Professor of Urbanism at the Graduate School of the Architectural Association.

While he praised the Tainan City Government for "creating opportunities for vision and having the confidence to lead," Barth cited the real challenge as re-thinking the relationship between the creative and high-tech industries with local traditions, he said.

Lai thanked the experts for their time and advice, adding that "history and glory alone cannot develop Tainan into a successful city."

"We need to connect with the international community and learn from their experience," he added.

Ake Ang, The China Post

1. From left: Professor of Urbanism at the Graduate School of the Architectural Association Lawrence Barth, INTA Secretary-general Michel Sudarskis, Tainan Mayor William Lai, Deputy Mayor Charles Lai, Taiwan Ecological Engineering Development Foundation Chairman Chen Tsuying and Singapore's Huang Yu-hsiang from the Urban Redevelopment Authority participate in question and answer session during a break.

2. INTA Secretary-general Michel Sudarskis was a main moderator at the "International Conference of New Metropolitan Synergies."

3. Tai Chi Goto, Principal of Japan's Fukuoka Urban Laboratory, thanked Taiwan for the support and said it gave to his home country.