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OPINION / NEW AIRPORT DEVELOPMENT

Golden land or urban swamp

Nakhon Suvarnabhumi concept deserves serious consideration

By JOHN KASARDA

It has taken nearly half a century to transform a place once called Nong Ngu Hao (Cobra Swamp) into a leading international airport named Suvarnabhumi, or Golden Land. Now, Thailand has a one-time chance to coordinate development around its new airport to create a truly "Golden Land" that can boost the nation's well-being for the next half century. At stake is no less than Thailand's potential for higher economic standing, greater prestige in the world, and increased prosperity for people at all levels of Thai society. Much of this has to do with the key role that hub airports play in providing speed, agility and market connectivity for today's most important industries _ electronics, automotive, pharmaceutical, fashion, tourism, premium perishable (cut flowers, fresh seafood), and other high-value sectors in which Thailand is competing.

Thailand will move ahead in this global game _ or fall behind _ depending not only on how effectively Suvarnabhumi operates but also how infrastructure and land around it develops.

Will factories, distribution centres, corporate headquarters and tourist-related businesses be able to move goods and people to and from the airport quickly and efficiently?

Will industrial, commercial and residential clusters be appropriately located to maximise benefits to firms and their workers, and minimise problems?

Will the broader airport zone evolve in an environmentally sustainable, economically efficient and aesthetically pleasing manner, serving as a 21st-century model of urban development?

The encouraging news is that an intelligent and realistic answer has been provided. The Thaksin administration recently announced a visionary proposal to create a new province, Nakhon Suvarnabhumi, to promote coordinated planning and administration throughout a broad airport-integrated region that now spans parts of several provinces and numerous municipalities. That's important because the present division of authority among so many local governments virtually assures jurisdictional conflicts and bad planning.

Despite the common-sense merit of Nakhon Suvarnabhumi, it quickly prompted an outcry in the press, in public forums and from some politicians. Critics charge that the new airport city would generate overdevelopment, traffic congestion, noise and safety issues, floodwater damage and other environmental problems.

The critics are correct, up to a point. These problems are real and serious, as I have personally witnessed time and time again during two decades of studying airport area development throughout the world. In most places, sadly enough, such development does indeed go wrong. But this is why the Nakhon Suvarnabhumi critics need to think further. Airport area development usually goes wrong precisely because the governance structure lacks broad planning authority like this new province would provide. Most development around airports happens spontaneously and haphazardly, worsening environmental and traffic problems while generating inappropriate business locations and unsightly urban sprawl.

These problems will surely happen in the area surrounding Suvarnabhumi unless coordinated, enforceable planning occurs.

At the very least, this planning must provide for: 1) efficient, integrated road and rail transportation; 2) development of commercial facilities in clusters rather than sprawling strips along highways; 3) land near the airport reserved for aviation-intensive businesses and industries; 4) residential development located safely away from aircraft noise zones; and 5) sensitive wetlands protected and improved for wildlife and flood control.

A new provincial government for the Suvarnabhumi region won't guarantee these outcomes. But without it, rampant, uncontrolled and speculative development will create an urbanised swamp. This would be the worst case scenario feared by Nakhon Suvarnabhumi's critics and a squandered opportunity for the nation. Nakhon Suvarnabhumi deserves thoughtful consideration from everyone who cares about Thailand's future.

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