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## Look again at options for government offices

The government likes to present itself as being open and transparent. But it sometimes has difficulty being upfront with the community – even about basics such as its office needs.

Chief Executive Donald Tsang Yam-kuen and other top officials say research has shown the best option to overcome the inadequacies of the Central Government Offices is to build a new headquarters on the waterfront Tamar site. That contention has been based – at least in part – on a government study that supported the proposal.

But as we report today, another long-completed study – updated in recent years but kept secret – says it would be feasible to upgrade the offices that already exist by renovating the Central Government Offices and rebuilding Murray Building. This is an option that deserves public scrutiny and debate.

The Tamar proposal would be much more expensive, although the government contends that much of that redevelopment would be borne by commercial interests. Establishing a new complex on the Tamar site is also controversial because it would involve lining yet more of the harbourfront with buildings – at least four high-rise office blocks and a shopping mall, in addition to a network of roads. And this would be at the expense of the last patch of waterside in Central on which parkland could be placed.

How much it would cost to revamp the offices in Lower Albert Road and Murray Building is unknown because the report, unlike that for Tamar, has been kept confidential. Suffice to say, though, architects' estimates are not needed to realise that redesigning one existing structure and rebuilding another would cost less than building a complex of new ones.

But while we should be concerned about how our government is spending taxpayers' money, that is not the most important issue. At the heart of the matter is the way the government deals with the people it serves.

There is a need for a fresh public consultation on the government office project, to consider all the available options. Decisions on the future of the Ta-

mar site should not just be left to bureaucrats.

As the think-tank Civic Exchange and other like-minded groups have consistently pointed out, Tamar's location provides an opportunity to give Hong Kong something it is conspicuously lacking: a place by the harbour for people to enjoy. Few cities can boast such a magnificent natural feature, yet unlike the few that do – Sydney and San Francisco among them – we seemingly try to keep people from the shore rather than attract them to it.

Civic Exchange's plans unveiled last month called for lush parkland crisscrossed by waterways and a central lake; a green oasis that would be a starting point to developing a wider blueprint for a harbour presently rimmed only by concrete.

Similarly, the Harbour Business Forum – a coalition of 120 of the city's leading companies and business groups, including Kerry Group, the largest single shareholder of the SCMP Group – wants a meeting with Mr Tsang and other top officials to ensure better co-ordination of projects and a comprehensive harbour strategy, particularly along Central, Wan Chai, West Kowloon and the old airport site at Kai Tak.

To date, rather than having a wide-ranging public discussion, the government has shown its single-mindedness. By doggedly pointing to Tamar as the only option for new government headquarters without consideration of alternatives – there are several, including building it at Kai Tak for example – doubts are raised as to whose interests are being served.

It is as if nothing has been learned from the problems the government has run into over plans for the West Kowloon Cultural District. There is a need to first take into account the views of the people.

By opening the process to proper debate and considering all options, the government will avoid such mistakes. It can start by releasing the undisclosed study to public scrutiny. Tamar may yet prove to be the best choice; we will not know, though, while the government continues to push ahead with its plans in the absence of full and frank consideration of the alternatives.