

Bid to license karaoke bars hits snag

By Flora Wong

A GOVERNMENT undertaking to licence karaoke bars in a bid to stamp out underage prostitution is slipping behind because no government departments are willing to take up the licensing responsibility, according to sources.

A recent Fight Crime Committee meeting was cancelled when no apparent progress on karaoke licensing could be made, the sources said.

Discussion on karaoke licensing was expected at the 2 July meeting, but would have to wait until 3 September if no other meeting could be arranged before then.

Members were notified of the cancellation without being given a reason and no agenda had been issued for the 2 July meeting.

Principal Assistant Secretary for Security Karen Pong said the group was still working on the proposal.

She denied that the cancellation of the Fight Crime Committee meeting was related to the progress of karaoke licensing.

Asked if the proposal would be shelved, she said the working group had not arrived at this stage to recommend such a step.

However she could not say when the proposal would be introduced to the Legislative Council, or when it would be implemented.

A spokesman for the committee chaired by Chief Secretary Anson Chan said the meeting was "postponed" because "no pressing matters are to be discussed".

"The paper (on karaoke licensing) is being drafted and the

postponement has nothing to do with the paper," he said.

A government inter-departmental working group comprising police, the Television and Entertainment Licensing Authority (Tela), and the Urban and Regional Services Departments was established last year to study the proposal to license karaoke bars.

United Democrat Legislative Council Security Panel deputy chairman James To said: "If they say they may not legislate, they have to explain why."

He pointed out that police raiding was not the most effective way to stamp out underage prostitution in karaoke bars.

Urban Councillor and Hong Kong Association for Democracy and People's Livelihood (HKADPL) chief secretary Daniel Wong said the government had earlier promised to pass the bill on karaoke licensing within this Legislative Council session which ended this month.

"It should not be too difficult to licence karaokes, but government departments are passing the responsibility to each other," Mr Wong said.

Sources said the government was under public pressure to licence karaoke bars where underage prostitution was reported to take place.

Tela was reluctant to licence karaoke bars where alleged underage prostitutes were operating, the source said.

The Urban Council, which is the licensing authority for liquor licences, and the police, which license massage parlours, were also reluctant to take up the responsibility.