

A \$7m hurdle to saving teenagers

by Zelda Cawthorne

THE Matilda Hospital's donation of \$150,000 touched Frank White. "It's coming out of their Bazaar and Sedan Chair Race Charities Fund and is tremendously generous," says the pioneer behind the Warehouse project.

Two local corporations also pitched in last week — one pledged \$100,000, the other \$50,000 — though their contributions were greeted with mixed feelings.

"We're grateful for any help we get, but we're still far short of the \$7 million we need by the end of the month," says Dr White, chairman of the project's organising committee. "We had pinned our hopes on being operational by September. Now — well, I just don't know."

Without that \$7 million, his dream of providing teenagers with a place they can call their own, may have to be abandoned.

On any given Friday or Saturday night, scores of teenagers — most from affluent homes — can be seen aimlessly cruising the narrow streets of Lan Kwai Fong, many of them drunk and not a few high on dope.

New Year's Eve, 1992, ushered in the horror that had been waiting to happen. "The tragedy which occurred in Lan Kwai Fong, taking 21 young lives and injuring many others, underscored the urgency with which the situation needs to be addressed," reads the Warehouse project report.

By the time it was written, the Warehouse Club was on the way to reality thanks to an inspired suggestion by the Government Property Administrator, Ian Wotherspoon: how about the Old Aberdeen Police Station? When Dr White, reader in anatomy at the University of Hong Kong and the father of two teenagers, first visited the 103-year-old red-brick building — unoccupied since the late 80s — he instantly saw its potential.

"Fantastic," he said, imagining what could be made of all that space: 6,000 square feet of it in the main, a two-storey building, plus a further 3,000 square feet in the former residential quarters and service buildings. And all of it set in verdant enclosed grounds.

Sixteen months on, the Warehouse is a registered charity, has the blessings of the Antiquities and Monuments Advisory Board, and the full backing of Government.

"Everyone, from the Pattens down, has been absolutely brilliant," says Dr White. "We've not only been

promised a peppercorn rent (a nominal \$1 per year), but the Architectural Services Department [ASD] has agreed to act as our agent."

The arrangement couldn't be better. As Dr White points out, the Government was already obliged to renovate the exterior of the Old Aberdeen Police Station because of its status as an historic listed building — work began on March 1 — so it made perfect sense to also have the interior work done by the ASD.

"One plan was to remove a floor in the main building in order to create a big communal hall, but that wouldn't have been compatible with the original architecture and would have probably been rejected by the historical people," said S. L. Lam, Senior Property Services Manager (Antiquities).

"Luckily, there's a 110-square-metre building in the grounds — a later addition — which will do just as well for the young people once it's fitted out."

With the main building given over to activities including theatre, visual arts, indoor sports and study facilities, and the rest providing space for everything from discos and cabarets to an eatery, there is little doubt that the Warehouse would become a major attraction.

There is only one snag. "In order for the ASD to proceed," Dr White explains, "we must provide a letter of authority guaranteeing that we can pay the \$7 million which the Government will have to spend on our behalf to carry out the interior work."

"In fact, we only need \$5.5 million because a kindergarten has already agreed to pay us \$1.5 million in return for using the premises during the day. The problem is that all restoration and refurbishing work must be completed before September when the kindergarten wants to move in — and that means having all the money in hand this month."

"We applied to the Jockey Club for a grant more than a year ago and still haven't heard anything definite. What we need right now is that \$7 million. Naively, we thought we'd have no trouble raising it after we sent out letters to 19 of Hong Kong's major corporations."

The message doesn't seem to have hit home. Of the 19, three said no, 11 have yet to reply and the biggest donation among the remaining five was last week's \$100,000.