

~~\$200 'bonus'~~ falls way short

Mark Andrews

What to do with a \$200 cheque? That is the question that will be facing the territory's single-parent families once the Government acts on its decision to start supplementing their incomes with a monthly \$200 stipend.

So, let's spend it.

How about a nice day out - perhaps a visit to Ocean Park?

Let's see, peel \$130 off the wad for yourself, \$55 for junior, and wow! \$15 left over for the rest of the family. Hmmm...

Let's take the kids out for dinner and a movie instead.

A total of \$45 per head means a parent and three kids can squeeze into seats with a couple of bucks left over for popcorn.

But after paying \$160 for a large pizza and soft drinks, this is beginning to sound like an expensive evening.

Surely the Governor, Chris Patten, didn't anticipate sending all the single-parent fami-

lies in the territory to the movies. More sensible spending is probably what he had in mind.

Fine, let's pick up some baby supplies for the littlest one.

A pack of 84 nappies and a large can of formula should last a couple of weeks.

Maybe a new bib and a soother, just for a treat. What's that you say? \$260?

Well, perhaps we'll buy some groceries instead.

A bag of rice, four litres of milk, two dozen eggs, half a kilogram of minced beef and a frozen pie. \$203.

"Just \$200 may not be enough, especially for single-parent families on social assistance," Anna Cheung, the programme director of the Hong Kong Society for Children's Health and Development, said.

The new government supplement in most cases will only ease the scraping at the bottom of the barrel that goes on in the daily struggle for basic necessities, she said.

Singularly unimpressed

Apple Wan

Single-parent families say the extra \$200 granted to them per month in the Governor's policy speech will not help much to improve their living standards.

In his policy speech address on Wednesday, the Governor promised to provide each single-parent family with an additional supplement of \$200 a month.

"An extra \$200 a month means we may have \$6 more every day, but this lags behind the rapid inflation rate," a single parent, Lee, said.

Lee, 39, whose husband died 12 years ago, has been living on a public assistance allowance of \$4,234 a month. She is raising a son, 12, and a daughter, 11.

Lee said she spent \$830 a month on rent for her public housing flat.

"I can't make ends meet," Lee said.

"My children and I are consuming a piece of fish, which costs \$5, for two meals.

"And I dare not hang my clothes out to dry as I am afraid they will fall into the street and get lost."

Another single parent, Wong, 32, has been living on a \$5,600 public assistance allowance since 1992.

She said the extra \$200 might just help her and her three children eat a better breakfast.

Wong lives in a flat in an old building in San Po Kong and pays more than \$500 a month towards rent.