

HONG KONG STANDARD
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Alarm bells ring on fire safety

A GREAT deal has been said before about fire safety in high-rise buildings.

Sadly, most of it has been ignored.

Although much can be done to avoid fires, they still happen — even in the best establishments.

What could be more sensible than trying to ensure that somebody is responsible for fire safety in a given building when the owners are away?

The Fire Safety (Commercial Premises) Bill, currently before the Legislative Council Bills Committee, had included an amendment which would have made people in charge of a building other than the owners responsible for complying with fire safety in the absence of the owners.

This sounds like a good idea. It would reduce the danger posed by potential fire-trap buildings whose owners are out of town.

Unfortunately, legislators do not see it that way. Members of the Bills Committee yesterday opposed what they saw as an overly broad definition of "owners" as people who were managing or controlling the premises on behalf of the owner. And the amendment has been deleted.

It is true that we have to be wary of legislative overkill and draconian catch-all rules which may cause unnecessary confusion. But we hope that legislators will come up with some alternative regulations aimed at ensuring that tragedies such as last month's Yau Ma Tei inferno never happen again.

Just how tough that job will be is proved by a report that government building inspectors have found illegal alterations to the fire exits and escape routes in the ill-fated Garley Building — and some of the emergency exits were locked.

The sheer, inexcusable stupidity and greed of people who create fire trap dangers in our high-rise community is beyond belief. This is something that has happened countless times in the past in Hong Kong. And all too often it has been brought to public attention because of the tragic — and sometimes catastrophic — results.