

## \$1.5 million upgrade for jaguars' cages rejected

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A PLAN to spend \$1.5 million on better cages for the four jaguars in the Botanical Gardens, Mid-Levels, was rejected yesterday.

Urban councillors said the price was too high.

Joseph Chan Yuek-sut, a member of the recreation select committee, said: "Is it really worth spending so much money on animals? I'm afraid it's too extravagant and the public will complain."

The money would have paid for plastic-coated mesh from the United States to protect the jaguars from lead-poisoning when they bite the bars of the cages.

But councillor Ip Kwok-chung said: "We've been keeping the animals in Hong Kong-made cages for so long and none of them has been poisoned. Why must we import new ones from the United States?"

"Even though the architect said the new cage would be safer and more durable, I

don't think it is worth so much money."

However, the RSPCA, a staunch critic of the zoo, lashed out at the immediate rejection of the plan on the basis that it needed further study.

"If they're kept in any place of confinement where there is a danger of lead poisoning, the danger should be obliterated straight away," RSPCA chief superintendent Dennis Jones said.

"They should be protected in the best way possible."

Last year, the committee approved \$5.4 million to improve the jaguars' cages.

The plan included a 600-square metre enclosure — four times larger than the existing one — with artificial rocks to create a natural environment with trees, a landscaped area and a larger swimming pool.

Yesterday the architects told the committee that their original estimates had been revised to include the safer cage, a secondary enclosure, more artificial rocks and a

larger wading pool.

The members insisted on sticking to the original cost estimate, saying the public would be outraged if the price went up.

Councillors told the architects to report back in September with new plans that did not cost a cent more, and suggested they forget about the imported mesh.

Fred Li Wah-ming said: "I don't think the point of poisoning is important because there is no proof of this."

"What is important is that we've agreed on the cost of \$5.4 million and we should stick to this."

Honorary zoological curator Dr Kenneth Searle rejected the idea that the jaguars could be poisoned by the mesh.

"All the paint that we use on all of our exhibits is a special, zoological, lead-free paint," Dr Searle said.

"There is no way they could get lead poisoning from it. It's not toxic in any way."