

Boards face Urbco fight over powers

THE chairman of the Urban Council has attacked demands for the Governor to grant increased powers to district boards.

District board chairmen are drawing up a list of new powers — ranging from market management to liquor licensing — they think the Governor, Mr Chris Patten, should grant them in his maiden policy speech on October 7.

Though divided on whether the appointment system should be abolished, the chairmen are united in calling for more powerful boards to take part in local administration and decision-making.

Some see this increase in powers as the beginning of an overhaul of the existing system.

But their call is likely to meet strong opposition from the two municipal councils, which are determined to hold on to their powers.

Urban Council chairman Dr Ronald Leung Ding-bong said decentralising the power of the municipal councils would be a waste of resources and Mr Patten should not “change for the sake of changing”.

“Then each district will come up with different decisions. It will never work that way,” he said.

The district board chairmen said the merging of the municipal councils and the district boards would become inevitable as more local administration work was put into the hands of district boards.

In his first address to legislators next month, Mr Patten is expected to herald a faster pace of democracy at local level by abolishing the appointment system and by giving more powers to the district boards.

There have also been proposals by political groups that the district boards become a functional constituency again to increase the directly elected content of the Legislative Council.

Topping the list of demands by the district boards are powers to deal with local concerns, such as minor road maintenance works, the granting of liquor licences and the management of local markets and recreational facilities.

Giving district boards control of these areas would increase efficiency, the district board chairmen said, because re-

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quests for minor renovation works could take years to go through central government due to red tape.

It would also stop the functions of the municipal councils and the district boards overlapping.

The chairman of Tai Po District Board, Mr Ho Yung-sang, suggested the Government set up a small capital works fund for the district boards to perform such functions.

He said the district offices should also enjoy some decision-making power to be exercised with the district boards.

Mr Choy Kan-pui, chairman of the Sha Tin District Board, urged the Governor to use the London local council system as a framework for reforming local government in Hongkong.

Local councils in London are much more powerful bodies than the district boards. Their power encompasses local education and social services, and they can raise their own revenues.

Though he did not anticipate the district boards having as much power as that, Mr Choy said they should at least have a say in the allocation of school places and the construction of social welfare facilities.

But some said more profound changes were necessary. Kwai Tsing District Board chairman Mr Leung Kwong-cheong said streamlining the two municipal councils and the 19 district boards into four district councils would be the best long-term solution.

An overhaul of the existing system would ensure each district council had a fair distribution of facilities to start with.

“If the Government decides to keep the 21 bodies, just giving [district boards] more power doesn't help much,” he said.

Dr Pang Hok-tuen, vice-chairman of the Regional Council, said a complete revamp would be too drastic and not cost-effective.

He believed the roles of the municipal councils and the district boards did not overlap and that the increase in district board power should not happen at the expense of the power of the two municipal councils.