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10pc gambling slug proposed

By AGNES CHAN

Unofficial Legislative Councillor Mrs Rita Fan is considering asking the Government to increase betting duty during the Budget debate.

That is the belief of the chairman of the Education Action Group, Mr Anthony Ha, after meeting Mrs Fan and two other Umelco members yesterday.

The EAG proposed a 10 per cent across the board increase in betting duty which, it said, would bring in roughly an extra \$1 billion for the Government.

The Financial Secretary, Sir John Bremridge, had proposed a 0.5 to three per cent increase, estimating that would bring in up to \$151 million.

The group made the proposal on the basis that if income can be taxed by as much as 17 per cent, duty on standard bets should not be limited to just nine per cent.

"Also seen against the background of a 100 per cent-plus increase in cross-harbour tunnel toll and a 100 per cent increase in the rail fare from Kowloon to Lowu, there is no reason why a 10 per cent increase for betting duty should be considered excessive," Mr Ha said.

And he stressed that the 10 per cent increase in duty for every kind of bet — standard, exotic and Mark Six — should not be shouldered by the Royal Hongkong Jockey Club but should rather come from dividends.

Mr Ha said he had reason to believe that such an increase in betting duty would not only benefit the Government but may also deter indulgence in gambling.

The proposal, he said, should be found acceptable by the majority of the population.

Mr Ha said the three Umelco members whom he met — Miss Maria Tam, Mrs Fan

and Mr Andrew So — had adopted a positive attitude towards the proposal during the meeting at the Umelco office.

He said Mrs Fan, in particular, had stressed that it was reasonable to expect the Government to consider increasing betting duty.

"Mrs Fan said she will seriously consider asking the Government to raise the betting duty during the Budget debate," Mr Ha said.

The debate will take place on March 28.

The chairman said Miss Tam also agreed with the idea of increasing betting duty but added that it should be increased gradually.

"She said the amount and extent of the increase should be more closely examined."

Mr So, he said, had agreed that the present betting duty was not great and was in favour of an increase — provided it did not affect the Government's provisions for educational and social services.

Mr Ha said the EAG was pleased that the provision for education had been raised from 14.9 per cent of the total Government expenditure in 1983/84 to 16 per cent.

This reverses the trend of the past eight years which witnessed a decline in the share for education.

"The Government's increased investment in education reflects its willingness to respond to public opinion and its commitment to the future of Hongkong," he said.

But the EAG urged the Government to be more sympathetic to the situation of the "sandwich" middle class regarding income tax.

"A progressive taxation with widened income bands, taking into account the accumulative inflationary effects over the years, would be more equitable," Mr Ha said.

He said Mrs Fan also agreed that the present taxation system had put the middle class in a difficult situation.