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Abattoirs may be privatised to cut losses

By JOHN TANG

THE Urban Council hopes to cut huge annual losses of \$41 million by privatising its abattoirs.

Food Hygiene Select Committee chairman Chan Kwok-ming told yesterday's monthly meeting that a private contractor was interested in taking over the operation of the Kennedy Town Abattoir and building a new slaughterhouse in Sheung Shui.

Preliminary discussions have been satisfactory and the council's executive arm, the Urban Services Department (USD), is about to enter into formal negotiations with the operator, he said.

The Kennedy Town Abattoir is one of two slaughterhouses managed by the Urban Council - the other at Cheung Sha Wan is likely to be pulled down, according to the plan.

Mr Chan said the Kennedy Town and Cheung Sha Wan abattoirs had been operating at a loss because of high costs in keeping the oversized staff and maintaining the installations.

At present more than 200 people work at the two abattoirs, but this is likely to be cut by half if the privatisation plan is successful.

Mr Chan estimated that a large number of the redundant workers would be able to fill other USD vacancies, or retire, but a small number might have to find new jobs.

After privatisation the

USD would have no control over the slaughtering prices, although it would continue to monitor hygiene through its inspectorate, said Mr Chan.

"I agree that it will be difficult to guarantee low prices, but I think people should not worry too much because the private slaughterhouses in the New Territories are providing services at an acceptable price," he said.

"Privatisation may not necessarily force up prices because the company can achieve economies with a more flexible use of resources."

At present, about 70 per cent of fresh meat in Hongkong comes from the Kennedy Town and Cheung Sha Wan abattoirs.

From April 1987 to March last year, 2½ million animals were slaughtered with a daily average of 6,570 pigs and 335 heads of cattle.

● The introduction of computerised admission systems is expected to greatly reduce booking time at the Urban Council's sports facilities.

At present sport and leisure enthusiasts are widely critical of having to book and pay a week in advance to take advantage of the territory's municipal sport centres and playing areas.

But the vice-chairman of the council's Recreation Select Committee, Mr Fan Kam-ping, said changes were on the way.

The Urban Services Department is studying the feasibility and financial implications of introducing computerised systems.

Reviews of the booking procedures of various sport facilities will be conducted after the department's Leisure Services Division is reorganised in May.

And booking procedures of athletics grounds, sport pitches, squash courts, indoor games halls, hard surface areas in parks and playgrounds, bowling greens, swimming pools and tennis courts, will be reviewed over the next year.

Mr Fan said Hongkong's facilities were heavily used by Government sport bodies, schools, the council and the general public.

"The booking procedures have to be flexible enough to allow various types of uses to be accommodated while preventing abuses.

"This dual requirement has resulted in a situation where booking procedures are fair, but at the same time rather complex," he said.

Meanwhile, the chairman of the council's Administration Select Committee, Mr Stephen Lau Man-lung, said the authority's new sport and recreational facilities were sufficiently manned despite the territory-wide labour shortage.

But he admitted there were problems in finding experienced staff.