

S. C. M. P.

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Waste of money, says Urbco Anger at plan for council

By MATTHEW LEUNG

A major row is brewing between the Urban Council and the Government over the question of whether a regional council should be set up in the New Territories.

Speaking to reporters after a two-hour closed-door meeting of the standing committee of the Urban Council, irate councillors yesterday called the proposed council "a great waste of manpower and money."

And one of them, Mrs Elsie Elliott, hinted that if the council's views were ignored by the Government there might be some resignations.

But the Heung Yee Kuk yesterday gave unanimous support to the proposal.

And many kuk members opposed any suggestion that Urbco be expanded to the New Territories.

They said the regional council must be made up of New Territories people because they knew local affairs best. (See full report on Page 13).

Meanwhile, Urbco members charged that the Government was pursuing a "divide and rule" policy.

Some blamed the Government for "misleading" the public into speculating on whether the proposals carry any political significance for 1997.

Angry councillors complained that they had been kept in the dark about the proposals until they were formally announced by the

Chief Secretary, Sir Philip Haddon-Cave, last Wednesday.

They demanded that the Government provide more details about the proposals.

A general agreement was also reached that the council should arrive at as near an unanimous a view as possible on the subject.

Councillors decided to hold an extraordinary meeting of the standing committee tomorrow week to further pursue the matter and to try to reach a united viewpoint to present to the Government.

Some councillors asked the chairman of the Urban Council, Mr Hilton Cheong-Leen, who had been briefed by Sir Philip before the Government's announcement, why he had not notified them beforehand.

Mr Cheong-Leen later explained to reporters that the Chief Secretary had given him a broad outline of the Government's proposals the day before it was announced.

But due to the lack of time, he could not pass this on to councillors before the announcement, Mr Cheong-Leen said.

Many councillors said they were "very upset" about the proposals, and Mrs Elliott said she was shocked when

she heard the announcement.

She said there was no consultation whatsoever and "this is unacceptable."

Mrs Elliott feared there will be a great deal of confusion as there will be two sets of policies — one for the New Territories and the other for the urban area.

"And how is the department (Urban Services Department) going to cope with it?" she asked.

The USD is responsible for environmental work in both the New Territories and the urban area.

"The territory is too small to have different policies working in two different areas. We are not in conflict with the New Territories, we want to join with them."

"It seems that the Government is trying to cause conflicts. We don't want conflicts, we want a united front."

"We don't want any divide-and-rule policy in Hongkong. We want the people to be united," she said.

Mrs Elliott said there is a possibility that the Government does not want to see an all-powerful council.

She added that some councillors may think of resigning if their views were ignored.

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Urbco anger over NT plan

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Another councillor, Mr Fung Kin-kee, demanded a meeting with the Government officials who thought of the scheme.

Mr Walter Sulke said the proposal would be a "great waste of money and a great waste of manpower."

Councillors were also worried over unsubstantiated reports appearing in the media that the council's name would be changed to the "Southern Regional Council."

They said the name of the Urban Council is well known to the public.

Meanwhile, Mr Cheong-Leen said it would have been a much simpler approach to have only one citywide council which includes the New Territories as well as urban areas.

Speaking in his capacity of a Wanchai District Board member, Mr Cheong-Leen told the press during a recess of a later Wanchai District Board meeting that an enlarged "citywide council" with representatives elected for the New Territories would be sufficient to take care of the interests of their constituencies.

And there is no question that urban representatives would be imposing their interests on the New Territories affairs.

It was the first time that Mr Cheong-Leen has openly given his view on the proposed council.

One important thing, he

said, is that the New Territories is becoming more urbanised.

He also noted that many policies decided in the Urban Council usually extended into the New Territories as well.

The significance of having one citywide council is that there would be a good interaction and exchange of experiences between elected and appointed representatives of the New Territories together with their counterparts from urban areas, he continued.

It is not a sound enough argument to say that an enlarged Urban Council is too large a body in terms of number of representatives.

The Kun Tong District Board for instance has more than 40 members, he said.

The Urban Council has a membership of 30 councillors.

A Government spokesman yesterday pointed out that public comments on the proposals to set up a second regional council to cover areas not currently covered by the Urban Council would be welcomed.

The Chief Secretary stated in particular that the advice of the district boards, and that of the Heung Yee Kuk, was being sought. So were the views of the Urban Council.

The spokesman explained that for any consultation on a major issue to be undertaken, draft proposals would have to be formulated first. This was precisely what the Government had done on this occasion.