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Urbco fury over 'rubber stamp'

# Anger at early report release

By MATTHEW LEUNG

Furious Urban Council members erupted yesterday at being asked to rubber stamp a document — just minutes before it was due to be discussed by a district board.

The Urban Council members were asked to pass a consultative document prepared by the Urban Services Department on the thorny topic of billiard hall licensing.

The document came up for the council to give it the go-ahead at 3.30 pm, just 30 minutes before it was due to be discussed by one of the district councils in Wanchai.

The department had circulated discussion papers to all 10 urban district boards early yesterday afternoon on the control of public billiard saloons and private billiard clubs.

Mr Lawrence Fung said there was absolutely no need for councillors to discuss and then rubber stamp a foregone

move by the department.

"Why does it need our discussion and then our approval? The paper has already been sent to the Wanchai District Board," Mr Fung said.

The irate councillor banged the table while speaking to emphasise his point.

As a matter of procedure, he said, a departmental paper required approval from the standing committee of the whole council before being distributed to district boards for consultation.

But the council chairman, Mr Hilton Cheong-Leen, said that the Wanchai District Board would only start its consultation session at 4 pm — and there was still time for the standing committee to decide whether to approve it.

He said a telephone call would be made to the Wanchai District Board after a committee's decision.

"I don't think it is procedurally wrong, so far," Mr Cheong-Leen said.

However, Mr Fung was supported by several other councillors.

"I'm very angry," said Mr Lam Chak-piu.

Twelve councillors also added their protests — while the chairman repeatedly tried to remind them that time was running out.

A vote was finally taken at 4 pm, when the paper was ratified, but Mr Walter Sulke lodged an objection and Mr

Lawrence Fung abstained.

Mr Fung Kin-kee said he supported it reluctantly. He thought the move had put councillors in a very embarrassing position.

Ironically there was no discussion at the Wanchai District Board meeting yesterday on the billiard issue.

Dr Patrick Hase, assistant director of Urban Services, who arrived for the district board meeting shortly after 4 pm, told members a final draft of the paper would be issued to district boards next week.

The board finally agreed to discuss the issue at its next meeting in April.

The council's environmental hygiene select committee said that before the council made any final decision on the licensing of private billiard clubs, the views of the public — and in particular of the district boards — should be sought.

The chairman of the environment hygiene committee, Dr Denny Huang, who wrote letters to district board chairmen seeking their opinions earlier this month, said that the motive behind the early distribution of the report was to enable the boards to discuss the issue as early as possible.

He said the boards have been asking the USD for more details on the issue.