

Alcohol sales fine hits \$50,000

By STELLA LEE

THE penalty for selling liquor to minors in restaurants and bars is to be increased 10 times — to \$50,000 — as part of the campaign against underage drinking.

The holders of liquor licences face the same fine for employing people under 15 at any time, or employing girls under 18 to work at night.

Proposals to update the laws and regulations on the sale of alcohol are being worked out by a working group of representatives from the police, Customs and Excise Department and the two municipal councils.

The chairman of the Commission on Youth, Eric Li Ka-cheung, welcomed a heavier penalty being written into the laws which were about 20 years old.

However, he said the commission was studying whether there was also a

need to ban the sale of liquor to minors at retail outlets, like supermarkets and stores.

"In light of the Lan Kwai Fong tragedy last year, we would like to see more stringent measures to solve the problem of underage drinking.

"But we have to find out clearly the scientific meaning of alcohol abuse and the level of impact it will have on young people first before we make a decision to recommend on the total ban of the sale of liquor at retail outlets," he said.

He said a recommendation report was expected to be out by the middle of this year.

Underage drinking has become a public concern after 21 people were crushed to death at Lan Kwai Fong where many young people

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Alcohol penalty increased

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were found to be able to buy alcohol from the bars.

A source from the inter-departmental working group said: "The maximum fine of \$5,000 gives little deterrent effect and we think \$50,000 is reasonable given the inflation over the years."

The six-month imprisonment for the offences, though seldom used, would remain on the statute book, according to the proposals.

Also proposed to remain unchanged was the maximum penalty of \$100,000 for selling liquor without a licence.

To make licence holders more responsible, the working group proposed that a

club owner would only be allowed to hold one liquor licence.

A similar requirement has already been imposed on bar and restaurant operators.

"The purpose is to make the owner spend more time on the licensed premise to ensure its operation does not breach the regulations," a source said.

It is also proposed that the duration of the licence should be more flexible than at present.

Changes would also be made in the main ordinance to clarify that the two liquor licensing boards have power to impose additional licensing conditions.

Consultation will soon

be held with the two municipal councillors on the proposed revision on the regulations.

Urban Councillor Daniel Wong Kwok-tung said revision should be made so that it would become an offence for any liquor licence holder to employ young people, including boys and girls under 18, at night.

He said this was necessary because complaints had been received that underage boys were being employed in some karaoke bars as "public relations assistants".

"The problem can now be controlled by the stipulation that there should not be any vice activities at the liquor licence premises.