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12 May 2001

Clerk to Bills Committee on
Karaoke Establishments Bill
Legislative Council
Legislative Council Building
8 Jackson Road
Hong Kong

(Attn: Miss Yvonne YU)

Dear Miss YU,

Bills Committee on Karaoke Establishments Bill

Thank you for your letter of 25 April 2001.

2. The Buildings Department and the Fire Services Department are aware of the six articles written by Professor CHOW of the Hong Kong Polytechnic University referred to Members by the Karaoke Requirements Concern Group.

3. Of the six articles, the following three articles relate to karaoke establishments:

- (a) Review on Safety Codes Relating to Karaoke Establishments and Fire Safety Management;

- (b) Survey on the Fire Safety Requirements in Karaoke Establishments; and
- (c) A Demonstration on Working Out Fire Safety Management Schemes for Existing Karaoke Establishments in Hong Kong.

4. In the first paper, Professor Chow is of the view that studies should be carried out to provide research data to support the requirements proposed. This apparently refers to the requirements on the width of internal corridor, fire resisting construction of the internal corridors and elimination of dead-ends. He also highlights the importance of fire safety management. In the second paper, Professor Chow, based on results of two surveys, is of the view that immediate action should be taken to enhance fire safety management by appointing a fire safety officer. In the third paper, Professor Chow highlights the fire safety concerns in karaoke establishments and suggests different fire safety management schemes be implemented.

5. We fully agree with Professor Chow's observation in Part 3 of his paper "A Demonstration on Working Out Fire Safety Management Schemes for Existing Karaoke Establishments in Hong Kong" that there are special characteristics in the layout and operation of a karaoke establishment e.g. long and narrow corridors, closed cubicles, covered with furnishings and linings on walls and carpets on floors etc. These cause problems in case of fire, leading to unacceptable life risk. This is exactly the reason why government is proposing additional fire safety requirements to tackle these problems.

6. The concept of fire safety management vouched by Professor Chow is in line with our approach of adopting "hardware" and "software" items in the proposed licensing scheme for karaoke establishments. "Hardware" items include the building design (restrictions on location of premises), passive protection measures (structural fire protection measures including compartmentation, fire doors, protected means of escape, etc.) and active protection measures (sprinkler system, emergency lighting, alarm system etc.). "Software" items include the requirements of short fire safety film and annual fire safety training for karaoke employees. The "software" items are good supplements to the "hardware" items.

7. We encourage karaoke establishment operators to engage fire safety officers and strengthen fire safety training for their staff to help upkeeping fire safety of karaoke establishments and disseminate the message of fire safety to their customers. This is an improvement on the “soft-ware” side and is a good supplement to the required fire safety measures. However, the engagement of a fire safety officer cannot be a substitute for the necessary fire safety requirements (the hardware) for karaoke establishment, which are important to give warning of a fire, control and suppress the fire spread, and increase the chance for the occupants to escape in case of fire.

8. In formulating the fire safety requirements, we have made reference to the existing Codes of Practice, past experience, the layout of karaoke establishments and consultation with professional bodies. In formulating the requirements on the width of the internal corridor, we have made reference to the Code of Practice for the Provision of Means of Escape in Case of Fire for a place of public entertainment.

9. Para. 9.3 of the current Code of Practice for Fire Resisting Construction requires that every internal corridor, other than shopping arcade, serving rooms or flats in different occupancies should be separated from such occupancies by walls having a fire resistance period of 1 hour. It is not unreasonable to treat each cubicle in the karaoke establishment as a different occupancy in the light of the characteristic of the karaoke establishment.

10. As to dead ends, it is a critical factor to the cause of fatalities in serious fires in the past few years. We are of the view that it should be eliminated wherever possible in karaoke establishments.

11. It should be noted that the current Codes of Practice on means of escape and fire resisting construction were published in mid-1990's following comprehensive reviews and consultation with the professional bodies.

12. Other than the prescriptive provisions, the Codes of Practice also state that alternative approach using a “fire engineering approach” to the protection of people and property from fire may also be acceptable. Operators of karaoke establishments wishing to adopt scientific and engineering principles may use the “fire engineering approach” to assess

and formulate the fire safety provisions in their premises. In such circumstances, the proposals will be considered by the Fire Safety Committee referred to in Professor Chow's paper "A Preliminary Discussion on Engineering Performance Based Fire Codes in the HKSAR".

13. I hope the above is useful for Members' reference. If you need further information, please let me know.

Yours sincerely,

(S W HUI)
for Secretary for Security