

**Administration's response to the submission of
Mr. YEUNG Wai-sing, Eastern District Council Member
on the Fire Safety (Buildings) Bill**

The Administration is pleased to know that Mr. YEUNG is in support of the legislative spirit and objectives of the Bill.

2. To help alleviate possible cash flow problems that some building owners may encounter and to provide the owners with comprehensive financial assistance, the Administration has obtained approval from the Finance Committee of the Legislative Council on 27 April 2001 to merge the "Fire Safety Improvement Loan Scheme" and the "Building Safety Improvement Loan Scheme" to form the "Comprehensive Building Safety Improvement Loan Scheme" ("the Scheme"). With a commitment of \$700 million, the scope of the Scheme is extended and the eligibility criteria are relaxed to render assistance to owners for carrying out repair works and improving building safety. The Scheme will be administered by the Director of Buildings. An advisory committee will also be set up to help implement the Scheme. Having regard to the views of the advisory committee and subject to the results of the income and asset assessment of the applicants, the Director of Buildings may offer interest-free loans to applicants who have financial difficulties; extend the repayment period from 36 to 72 months; or allow owners who are unable to repay the loan because of economic hardship to defer repayment until transfer of the property.

3. The enforcement authorities will adopt a flexible and pragmatic approach in taking enforcement actions and draw reference to the valuable experience gained in the implementation of the Fire Safety (Commercial Premises) Ordinance over the past three years.

4. The fire service installations and the fire safety construction of composite buildings are the integral parts of the buildings. The installation and construction works should not be carried out in phases according to their uses. Moreover, if they are to be undertaken in phases, the costs will be higher and the owners or occupants of the buildings will suffer greater inconvenience. According to the proposed implementation plan, the authorities will deal with domestic buildings only upon completion of the 10-year improvement programme for the composite buildings.

5. The enforcement authorities have undertaken to adopt a pragmatic and flexible approach in handling cases where owners encounter practical difficulties in complying with the fire safety directions. For example, the owners may propose alternative effective fire safety measures in place of the original requirements specified in the directions. In enforcing the legislation, the authorities will take the initiative to approach the owners, occupants or owners' corporations to help them solve the problems and provide consultative service. Moreover, we will encourage owners of old buildings to employ qualified professionals to inspect their buildings and put forward proposals to the enforcement authorities for upgrading fire safety measures to the required standards of the Ordinance so that the improvement works can start as soon as possible. The owners may also employ qualified professionals to inspect and certify the satisfactory completion of the improvement works. This would help the enforcement authorities to confirm that the fire safety condition of the buildings has complied with the new statutory standards. As regards the alleged high costs of the improvement works, we believe that the market has considerable competitiveness for prices to be adjusted by market forces. Owners should ask for quotations from various contractors to ensure that the prices are reasonable.

6. The enforcement authorities are now briefing the 18 District Fire Safety Committees on the Bill to give them a better understanding so that they can help the public understand the requirements and the implementation plan during their contacts with them. After the passage of the Bill and before its implementation, we will widely publicise the requirements and the details of the fire safety measures through various channels. These will include television and radio announcements of public interest; organization of seminars for owners' corporations, mutual aid committees and residents associations through the Home Affairs Department; publication and distribution of promotional leaflets; provision of a telephone hotline etc. The authorities will also disseminate the message of "improving fire safety of buildings" through the large-scale fire safety promotion activities to be held this year. We hope that through the above vigorous promotion activities, the general public and people of all sectors will have a better understanding of the objectives of the legislation and lend their support. As regards the implementation of the legislation, the enforcement authorities have already gained a lot of experience from the implementation of the Fire Safety (Commercial Premises) Ordinance over the past three years and will make good use of the experience to be accumulated in the implementation of the new legislation, with a view to pressing ahead the whole building fire safety improvement programme in a more pragmatic manner.