

# Profits up in smoke after complete ban takes effect

By COLLEEN LEE

**HONG KONG:** Owners of some entertainment venues are howling, saying business at their establishments has plummeted in the past two weeks because of the smoking ban.

Full enforcement of the ban on smoking in public areas came into effect on July 1, meaning people now have to butt out, at bars, nightclubs, bathhouses, massage establishments and mahjong/tin kau parlors. No one is allowed to smoke in public venues of any description, since universal enforcement of the law. Owners claim customer turnout just isn't the same as it was before the ban went into effect.

Chin Chun-wing, vice chairman of the Hong Kong Bar and Club Association, which represents about 200 bars in the city, estimated that the number of customers turning up has plunged 40 to 50 per cent over early July last year.

"The business on the past weekend was terrible. I saw many empty seats when I toured around bars in Tsim Sha Tsui and Causeway Bay on Saturday night. They used to be packed with people," he said.

Chin said the decline in business probably traces to the smoking ban. "Some smokers would gather and drink with friends at home rather than



**Hong Kong smokers have been squeezed out of the city's bars and clubs since a universal tobacco ban came into effect on July 1.**

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going out as they fear to be caught lighting up in pubs by law enforcers," he said.

He added that the bar trade already has been having a hard time since late last September because of the global financial meltdown. Now business has gotten worse, he said.

Chin said he is unsure whether the business will return but for the time being, he said,

many smokers have not gotten used to the ban yet and are not accepting it.

He estimated that some 80 to 90 per cent of bar-goers are smokers and some are still trying to sneak a puff here and there despite the law.

"We generally won't ask them to leave unless someone complains, or we will lose the customers," Chin said.

He said some bars have laid off staff to keep costs in line. Many are offering discounts on drinks in the hope that will bring in customers.

Edward Yuen Ho-yan, the owner of several spas, massage and sauna parlors, said his businesses had seen a drop of about a quarter in the past two weeks, compared with business last month.

"Taking a sauna is a kind of enjoyment. Smoking is another kind of pleasure. Some would rather puff at home to enjoy himself in view of the ban," he said.

Yuen said his spa in Cheung Sha Wan started cutting prices in half late last month in a bid to bring in more clients.

He said his outlets no longer provide ashtrays but will not stop clients from smoking if workers serving them and customers nearby raise no objection.

Kenny Shek, the manager of Club Paris, a nightclub in the east of Tsim Sha Tsui, said it had 20 to 30 percent fewer customers in the past two weeks compared to last month's traffic. He's holding on to his staff for the time being.

He said its staff will ask smokers to butt out at the club but will not ask them to leave even if they refuse to put out their cigarettes. "They have to be responsible for their act," he said.

Under the law, people caught smoking in indoor public areas are subject to fines up to HK\$5,000.

He said the ban has had a deterrent effect on his staff. At least they no longer light up while at work.

It's been against the law to light up in most indoor public places since January 2007. Hong Kong's 1,346 bars, nightclubs, bathhouses, massage establishments and mahjong/tin kau parlors enjoyed a long exemption but it's all over now. No one is allowed to smoke in public venues of any description, since the beginning of this month.

A spokeswoman for the Department of Health said in the first half of this year, the Tobacco Control Office had issued 3,206 summonses for smoking offence. And 13 summonses had been issued to offenders so far this month after the full enforcement of the ban.

One unruly patron at an amusement center assaulted a tobacco control officer since the universal ban came into effect. The officer suffered only a minor injury.

Tobacco control officers are not going away however. The spokeswoman said more are coming on board, with 14 more smoke police being added to the existing staff of 85.