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Bill Aims At Illegal Gun Sales

Lawmakers Consider Compromise Plan That Protects Legitimate Owners

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A bill aimed at cracking down on the illegal sale of guns in Connecticut while respecting the rights of legitimate gun owners passed a key legislative committee Wednesday.

The General Assembly's judiciary committee approved a compromise gun-trafficking bill 36-3 and forwarded the legislation to the Senate for a vote. A similar measure passed the Senate last year but died in the House after aggressive lobbying by the National Rifle Association.

Proponents of this year's bill said the compromise language and bipartisan support should ensure passage. Hartford Mayor Eddie Perez and Bridgeport Mayor John M. Fabrizi support the initiative, along with many urban police chiefs concerned about gun-related violence.

The bill approved Wednesday requires gun owners to securely store firearms and to report a loss or theft within 72 hours of the time they discover a weapon missing or risk criminal charges.

In response to concerns that legitimate gun owners would be labeled criminals if their homes were broken into and they failed to report a gun theft promptly, committee members softened punishment for first-time offenders to a maximum \$90 fine. Gun owners would also be allowed to keep their gun permits following a first offense.

A person convicted of a second offense would face punishment of up to 10 years in prison.

"We don't want to penalize law-abiding gun owners," said Rep. William Tong, D-Stamford, who helped craft the compromise late Tuesday. "This targets the bad guys, and I think legitimate gun owners agree that it's the bad guys that give gun owners a bad name."

The bill also creates a new state crime for trafficking in firearms that specifically targets so-called straw buyers, people who buy guns legally and then sell them on the black market to felons, teenagers and others who can't legally possess guns. Currently, when a violent crime is committed and police trace a gun back to its owner, they are often told the gun was lost or stolen and there is nothing more they can do.

The proposed new gun-trafficking crime carries a maximum prison term of five years for a person convicted of transferring five or fewer firearms illegally and up to a 10-year prison term if more than five guns are sold improperly.

The judiciary committee also approved a measure that provides \$1 million in new funding for the statewide gun-trafficking task force overseen by the state police and authorizes the state police to maintain a database of people who have reported the loss or theft of firearms or who violate any provision of the proposed new law.

State Rep. Arthur J. O'Neill, R-Southbury, said the committee's comprehensive response to the gun-trafficking issue reflected its primary concern about stopping illegal sales and not harming

legitimate gun owners.

"This makes sure people who are innocent victims do not wind up being criminals," said O'Neill, who previously opposed such legislation and helped negotiate the compromise bill with Tong.

Lawmakers resurrected the gun-trafficking bill this year in response to a surge in urban gun violence. Although there are no gun shops in Hartford, city police seized more than 500 guns last year. In New Haven, the number of firearm-related homicides jumped from nine in 2005 to 22 in 2006.

Angie Sutton, a Glastonbury resident whose stepfather was shot and killed in Hartford in 2002, pleaded with committee members to do something about the violence at a public hearing earlier this week.

"We bear the burden of proof that guns have destroyed lives and ripped families apart," said Sutton, who is a co-chairman of Mothers United Against Violence.

She said the proposed bill was a first step toward saving cities' youths and reclaiming communities.

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