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## Lost gun law advances in Hartford

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HARTFORD - Legislation giving private gun owners 72 hours to notify police that a firearm had been lost or stolen will be considered by the Public Safety Committee.

First-time offenders would receive only a ticket and a fine, but subsequent offenses would be considered felonies and result in loss of a gun permit or more.

The bill, approved by the Judiciary Committee yesterday, is viewed by legislators from both sides of the aisle as a major step in cracking down on illegal gun trafficking.

"I think this has real teeth," said freshman state Rep. William Tong, D-Stamford, who campaigned last fall on stiffer gun control measures and defeated Republican incumbent Donald Sherer.

Judiciary Committee co-chairman Michael Lawlor, D-East Haven, a former prosecutor with the state's attorney's office in New Haven, agreed.

"Right now, there's no legal obligation to report it," Lawlor said. "Our argument has always been, 'You want to own a gun, fine. Just take responsibility for it.' "

A similar proposal was approved last year by the Senate but struck down in the House, 79-66. At the time, Sherer voted against the bill, saying he was concerned the legislation could target unsuspecting citizens.

Tong has high hopes this year's bill will survive because it has the support of the Judiciary Committee's ranking Republican, state Rep. Arthur O'Neill of Southbury.

Tong said at "the eleventh hour" Tuesday, after a lengthy public hearing on the legislation, O'Neill proposed compromise language that he said would ensure his vote.

"To get him to flip on it is very, very significant," Tong said.

After yesterday's 36-3 committee vote, O'Neill acknowledged he has had an "A-plus" legislative rating

with the National Rifle Association for years.

He said one compromise was specifying that gun owners file a report within 72 hours of "having discovered or reasonably should have discovered" a missing firearm. Last year's bill would have required a report within 72 hours when an owner "knew or should have known" a gun was missing.

O'Neill and others said that language could have been used by over-aggressive prosecutors to build cases against vacationing gun owners or hunters with cabins who may not learn for some time of a break-in.

"It's not an unfounded concern," said Tong, who is an attorney. "I know in layman's terms it's tough to parse the differences, but there's a meaningful difference."

The legislation approved yesterday also requires firearms to be stored safely and not in a manner considered "reckless and irresponsible" by investigating police.

First-time offenders could be ticketed and fined up to \$90 depending on the circumstances. Last year's failed bill would have stripped first-time offenders of their gun permits.

"But it kicks up to a felony pretty quick in second and third offenses," Tong said.

He called the ticket for first-time offenders a "buffer."

"It's to protect otherwise law-abiding gun owners from a mistake," Tong said. "It sends a message: 'You do this again, you're really going to get whacked.'"

O'Neill said he has faith most gun owners who go through that first "bad experience" with police will be more responsible.

"Most people who get a speeding ticket stop speeding, at least for a while," he said.

O'Neill said he also supported the legislation because it would be accompanied by state investments in the Firearms Trafficking Task Force and in hiring two additional prosecutors to focus on illegal gun sales.

Lawlor yesterday speculated that last fall's victories by Tong, state Rep. Kim Fawcett of Westport and a few other freshman Democrats who had campaigned on gun control has persuaded the Republican minority to craft a bill that will pass the General Assembly this session.

State Rep. Claudia "Dolly" Powers, R-Greenwich, another member of the Judiciary Committee, also voted in favor of the compromise legislation yesterday.

She disputed Lawlor's scenario.

"You had Republicans voting for it last year. The entire Greenwich delegation voted for it," Powers said. "I thought we were getting it last year. . . . My hope is with the tweaking we did it will be acceptable across the board. To me, it's just kind of common sense."<sup>1/2</sup>

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