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Flare-up over Camden development plans

BY JOE RENNISON

A DISPUTE broke out again yesterday over Camden, North London, Council's proposals to link with Mr. Joe Levy's property company, Stock Conversion, in the redevelopment of the Tolmers Square area adjoining the Euston Road.

There were claims and counter-claims from pressure groups and the council on the advisability of the scheme, and the merits of alternative planning proposals for the area.

In the morning, opponents of the scheme gathered in some strength to put their case against the deal going through. A committee has been formed to try to prevent the redevelopment, under the heading of "Stop the Levy Deal," and it has gathered support.

Backing

Among those at the meeting yesterday to show their backing were Mr. Reg Freeson, "shadow" Minister for Housing and Construction, Mr. Hiltyd Harrington, deputy leader of the Greater London Council, and Mr. Paddy O'Connor, a Camden councillor and a former mayor of the borough. Support is also being expressed by a number of leading trade unionists.

Mr. Freeson, MP for Willesden, said people had been driven out of their houses and small businesses by what had happened in developments of this kind. The situation highlighted the battle that must be fought between public and privately owned land. If Camden went ahead it would be the duty of The Secretary for the Environment to advise the council that the approach would be the wrong solution.

Mr. O'Connor declared his total opposition to the scheme, and said that if the deal went through he would resign from the council.

Mr. Harrington said planning in London must be in the hands of the people and not those of developers. If planning was in the future to be left in the hands of such people he would go back to Wales.

The action committee and its supporters favoured an alternative scheme put up by two journalists, Mr. Christopher Booker and Mr. Bennie Gray, whereby the proposals would go ahead but the profits from the re-development — reckoned at about £20m.—would be returned to Camden council and not to the property developers.

Mr. Booker and Mr. Gray have formed a company, Claudius Properties, for the purpose of carrying out the scheme, and have financial backing.

Favourable

Also at the meeting was Mr. Nicholas Tomalin, the journalist who last month sought a High Court injunction against Camden council to prevent them going through with the deal. He has since withdrawn the writ, so that the news media can discuss the problem without facing action over something which might be *subjudice*.

Later, at a hastily convened Press conference, Mr. Frank Dobson, leader of Camden council, explained the attitude of the council in the matter. He said that if it felt that the alternative would succeed and give it houses and a profit it "would go crazy with pleasure." Camden's initial reaction on hearing about this scheme was favourable.

It was convinced that the financial and other backers of Claudius Properties would provide a viable scheme, but he did not believe that the profits coming to the council would be as large as Claudius estimated.

In any case, there was no alternative to the Stock Conversion scheme. Mr. Dobson said that the council did not like the Stock Conversion deal, but there was no other way of getting the redevelopment done. Stock Conversion owns nearly five acres of the site, and it was unlikely that the Minister would approve compulsory purchase orders for Claudius to get on with the job.

The council, he claimed, wanted houses as soon as possible. It was nearer to the people concerned, and understood their problems.