

Ham & High 29/6/73

THE TOLMERS SQUARE

GAMBLE

CAMDEN COUNCIL is preparing to take a major political gamble on the future of the 11-acre Tolmers Square redevelopment site in Euston.

Information received on Monday from Christopher Booker and Bennie Gray, directors of Claudius Properties, has convinced leading Labour councillors that their offer to carry out the joint development on a non-profit basis is no gimmick but a serious and potentially viable approach.

Subject to final guarantees from Claudius' merchant bankers, Edward Bates, the majority Labour group is now ready to scrap the commercial deal it was about to conclude with Mr Joe Levy's Stock Conversion and Investment Trust, which already owns nearly half the site and which has long regarded Tolmers Square as its special preserve.

Given that the financial ends can be tied up, the remaining obstacle is a political one. A Tory Environment Secretary would have to approve compulsory purchase orders on the whole site, including Stock Conversion's holdings.

If the council decides to risk it, it will be gambling the possible loss or long delay of 600 desperately needed homes at Tolmers Square against the chance not only of making some money on the deal but also of establishing an entirely new approach to major developments within its boundaries.

If all goes as planned, the full council will be faced with the decision on July 18. And though the officers have been asked to take soundings at the Department of the Environment about the chances of a CPO succeeding, help is unlikely to be forthcoming.

On the basis of the statement from deputy Town Clerk Mr Frank Nickson that the questions he put to Claudius about their financial situation "seem to have been satisfactorily answered", most Labour councillors are likely to accept the political risk of going ahead with the offer.

"A large number of people would dearly love not to do the deal with Levy," said Councillor Irving Kuczynski. "If we think Claudius will work, even if we think Geoffrey Rippon would turn it down, we have no alternative if we think ethically it is a better scheme."

But Councillor Frank Dobson, leader of the council, spelt out the serious problems in store. "If a major landowner of immense wealth opposes a CPO they are more likely to be able to obstruct it than a small man. The British legal system does pretty well by those who have the money to make it work."

The Tories on the committee were content to reserve their position on the matter, only raising the objection of possible delays in getting the housing built if Camden abandoned the Levy deal.

The only serious opposition from the Labour side came from former planning chairman Councillor Ivor Walker, architect of the agreement with Stock Conversion.

If the Claudius scheme fell through, the councillors would "look and be bigger men than if something goes wrong with the Levy one," he said.

Conservative alderman Luigi Denza asked the Town Clerk, Mr Brian Wilson, if he did not think that "an honourable man has certain obligations", suggesting that Camden had gone too far with Stock conversion to withdraw at this stage.

"I am not going to answer that question," replied Mr Wilson. "It is for the committee to decide. You would be going back on what you have already agreed by council resolution. You no doubt are doing so with your eyes open."

Whatever happens at Tolmers Square, the Booker/Gray intervention has shaken up the conventional thinking about local authorities' relationship with private enterprise in big development schemes of this kind.

"This has made everybody think a hell of a lot about the wisdom of our actions," said Alderman Roger Jowett. "It has opened new doors on all sorts of things and I am very grateful. It is an idea well worth thinking about in future."

The committee agreed to seek the final guarantees required from Claudius' bankers, to approach the Department of the Environment about the chances of a CPO and, if both proved satisfactory, to enter into detailed negotiations with Claudius with a view to an agreement.

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