

Council official is sent to work with Dome casino firm

Council tax payers are paying for the owners of the Millennium Dome to fill jobs at their planned supercasino, it emerged last night.

A senior official from Greenwich Council is working part-time at U.S. billionaire Philip Anschutz's firm AEG to help the company recruit staff for the vast gambling complex at the Dome.

MPs were outraged that a public servant was assisting Mr Anschutz, who gave John Prescott a cowboy outfit after entertaining him at his ranch.

The disclosure plunged the race for Britain's first super-casino into further controversy and raised fresh concerns over the close links between Greenwich Council and the entertainment firm. It fuelled suspicions that the bid for a Las Vegas-style casino at the Dome is a done deal – despite seven consortiums competing for the licence.

Building work for the casino at the Dome site – renamed the O2 – is already under way. Even the head of the panel who will recommend which bid should win yesterday admitted the process was one-sided.

At a public hearing into the Greenwich bid, Casino Advisory Panel chairman Professor Stephen Crow said there should have been more people objecting to the complex.

While the Anschutz Entertainment Group and Greenwich Borough Council were fully represented – along with a range of local development agencies all backing the bid – just one person, local Anglican leader Malcolm Torry, put the case against it.

He pointed out that while a new casino would generate jobs, many local ethnic minorities would not want them because they oppose gambling on religious grounds. A few seats allocated by the panel to dissenting voices remained empty, including those for the Salvation Army, the CASE campaign against casino expansion and two members of the public who has asked to be present.

Opposition critics dismissed the hearing as a ,mockery', and demanded proper local consultation to restore some credibility.

The one-sided meeting came after the revelation that the woman who ,faked' a letter of support from local religious leaders used to work as a tourism officer for Greenwich council before being hired by AEG. Rosa D'Alessandro's letter provoked the anger of local Christian, Muslim, Sikh and Jewish leaders and forced AEG bosses into a humiliating apology.

MPs demanded an open investigation into whether council chiefs have broken conflict of interest rules by working hand in glove with AEG.

In the latest development, AEG and Greenwich Council admitted that an unnamed official works three days a week at the entertainment com-pany's luxury offices in Canary Wharf, but is still paid by the local authority.

They refused to say whether the individual was a man or a woman or how long he or she had worked there.

Tory MP for Monmouth David Davies, who has called for a probe into the links between Greenwich Council and AEG, said: ,It is absolutely outrageous that the hard-pressed council taxpayers of Greenwich are funding a recruiting sergeant for John Prescott's cowboy friend Philip Anschutz. Whatever next? Will they try to hire Tessa Jowell as a roulette wheel hostess?'

Tory culture spokesman Hugo Swire said: ,We were promised an

open and transparent investigation, yet every day there are fresh revelations about the way the awarding of the contract is being handled.

,It is time for Tessa Jowell to come out of hiding and tell us how she intends to restore any shred of credibility to this flawed process before it is too late.'

Greenwich Council and AEG both insisted there was nothing wrong with an official working at the firm because it was part of a scheme to find ,local jobs for local people'.