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'Richo' on board cottages project

EXCLUSIVE

By **ROYCE MILLAR**
CITY EDITOR

CONTROVERSIAL former senator Graham Richardson has weighed into the world of Victorian development and politics, lobbying the Bracks Government over one of Melbourne's most contentious major projects.

But Mr Richardson's involvement in the \$400 million redevelopment of Kew Cottages seems not to have benefited the 100 disabled residents left at the 27-hectare site.

Work is behind schedule, with 20 residential units due for completion in November unlikely to be finished this year.

Mr Richardson is fighting accusations of tax evasion and a \$2.3 million tax bill relating to shares he held in the company Offset Alpine with the late stockbroker Rene Rivkin and former Qantas director Trevor Kennedy.

In recent months, Mr Richardson, a former NSW Labor king maker, has lobbied senior bureaucrats and at least one Victorian minister over Kew on behalf of one or both of the Sydney-based developers Walker Corporation and Mirvac.

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Major Projects Minister Theo Theophanous confirmed to *The Age* he had met Mr Richardson late last year. He stressed that officers also attended.

One of Mr Richardson's key Victorian contacts is also believed to have been Roads Minister Tim Pallas in his former role as senior staffer to Premier Steve Bracks. Mr Pallas did not respond to queries about Mr Richardson last night.

Who exactly Mr Richardson is working for at Kew is unclear. Mr Theophanous said Mr Richardson had represented Mirvac at their meeting. Yet Mirvac Victorian chief executive Greg Collins denied Mr Richardson had lobbied for his company. "Mirvac has not employed Graham Richardson to work on its behalf on on Kew Cottages," he said.

Walker Corporation Victorian manager Kevin Hunt refused to discuss Kew project details last night. Mr Richardson would not comment other than to say: "I never say who I work for."

Government and property industry sources said they believed Mr Richardson was really working for Walker Corporation, for which he has done much lobbying work, including recently in Tasmania.

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**Lobbyist
Graham
Richardson**



Richardson weighs in on cottages project

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Sources say that after troubled negotiations between the Victorian Government and its preferred developer, Walker Corporation, Mr Richardson was instrumental in securing a contract to start work on the project just days before the Government went into caretaker mode before the state election in October.

But the contract also gave Walker something to sell and soon after the Kew project was signed off, Walker sold its \$1.1 billion property portfolio to publicly listed Mirvac.

Mr Richardson is believed also to have lobbied the Government to ratify the transfer to Mirvac. While the Government has not yet agreed to the transfer, government and property sources say it is a matter of time.

In light of the controversies surrounding former premier Brian Burke in Western Australia and former Cain government minister and lobbyist David White in Victoria, revelation of Mr Richardson's Melbourne activities could embarrass Mr Bracks.

In the lead-up to the weekend NSW election, NSW Labor leader Morris Iemma sought to distance himself from Mr Richardson — his one-time employer — and reportedly cancelled a planned lunch to avoid embarrassment.

The fact that Mirvac looks set to undertake the development has angered some Government insiders and disability service workers who fear the company does not have enough understanding of disability services.

One hundred residents with intellectual disabilities are waiting for new housing at Kew after 400 were rehoused off-site in recent years. They will be rehoused in the 20 units integrated into a private housing development.

Monthly penalties of about \$750,000 apply for failure to deliver the first 20 disability units by December although it is believed it is likely Walker has sought to have penalties waived.