

Ex-premier attacked on lobby work

Paige Taylor

ANOTHER former West Australian premier turned lobbyist, Peter Dowding, has landed in controversy, criticised over pro-bono work he does for an Aboriginal corporation in the Pilbara.

Mr Dowding's work for the Ngarluma Aboriginal Corporation includes lobbying the state Government over a \$220 million housing development in Roebourne that would replace the troubled town's notorious "village" and provide accommodation for Pilbara mine workers.

The former family lawyer last month listed his new firm Fremantle Consulting Group on the state's register of government lobbyists, which was established in the wake of corruption hearings revealing the influence of former premier turned lobbyist Brian Burke.

Mr Dowding's free legal and strategic advice to the Ngarluma Aboriginal Corporation over the past year has pleased its chief executive, Laurie Poland, who said the former premier had been helpful in trying to find ways that indigenous people could join the region's boom.

Mr Dowding's niece, Robyne Churnside — a committee member of the Pilbara Native Title Service — has accused the lawyer of not listening to her Ngarluma people, in a letter to *The Fremantle Herald*.

"Although he claims to have 'a passion for indigenous social reform', it seems strange to me that my uncle-in-law is currently listed on the West Australian parliamentary register as a lobbyist for FMG Resources, a company which has treated Aboriginal people in the Pilbara with complete contempt, by putting a railway line through a sensitive heritage protected area in the Pilbara's Abydos/Woodstock region, against the strenuous objections of our relatives, the Balyku people," Ms Churnside wrote.

Mr Dowding was married to Ms Churnside's aunt Jill, also a Ngarluma woman. They have three adult children and work on projects affecting Ngarluma people. Mr Dowding said it was not realistic to expect every indigenous person to support everything the Ngarluma Aboriginal Corporation supported.

"I would not do any work for anyone that represented a con-

flict with Ngarluma," he said.

Mr Dowding was premier from 1998 to 1990, replacing Mr Burke.

He has described the leaking of cabinet minutes to Mr Burke as despicable and inappropriate.

Mr Poland said it was Mr Dowding's understanding of indigenous issues, not his understanding of government, that appealed to the Ngarluma Aboriginal Corporation.

"I can safely say it really doesn't matter to us that he was an ex-premier," Mr Poland said. "He's worked up here for many years with the Aboriginal Legal Service, so he knows a lot of people in the whole of the Pilbara and it is on that basis that people have confidence in him." The Ngarluma Aboriginal Corporation's proposed housing development would encourage indigenous people in the Pilbara to buy their own homes.

Mr Dowding said the proposal comprised 400 lots on land to be swapped between native title holders and the Carpenter Government. It would allow the closure of the village built for Aboriginal people in the 1970s, but never embraced by them because it fronted a cemetery.