

Victorian Minister Gordon Rich-Phillips defends million-dollar grant to private aero club

By Pat McGrath

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Photo: [Labor says Aviation Minister Gordon Rich-Phillips has some explaining to do. \(Facebook\)](#)

Victoria's Aviation Minister has defended the decision to hand a million-dollar grant to a private aero club where he stores his own plane.

Gordon Rich-Phillips said he had been a member of the Peninsula Aero Club in Tyabb for a year, and used the club's hangar to store his F33A single engine aircraft, otherwise known as the Beechcraft Bonanza.

He said he was approached by fellow members about applying for a government grant, but was not involved in the decision to approve funding for the club.

"I took advice, sought advice from the Department of Premier and Cabinet around managing any conflicts of interest," Mr Rich-Phillips said.

"Acting on that advice, I put in place delegations so that this matter or that any matter indeed related to that facility was dealt with by departmental officers without any reference to me or my office."

Peninsula Aero Club president Peter Bernardi said he did not speak with the minister about the grant after their original conversation.

"We advised him that we would be applying and he immediately took a step back. We just dealt with his department - in actual fact his signature never appeared on anything," Mr Bernardi said.

He said the minister did not frequent the social club attached to the Peninsula Aero Club.

"His aircraft is down on private land in a private hangar and you don't see him all that often," he said.

"I've been the president here for four years, I would have only spoken to the minister a half dozen times."

Government funds intended for regional airports

The State Government's \$20 million Victorian Regional Aviation Fund was established to assist with the "upgrading of regional public use airport infrastructure across the state".

Mr Bernardi said the club applied for funds to improve facilities.

"It's to improve the taxi ways, the lighting, all facilities for those people who use it - it is available for general use, and we felt that if we could improve them to a higher standard we could create even more employment here," he said.

Mr Rich-Phillips said the club, located just south of his electorate in Melbourne's eastern suburb, qualified for the program.

"The program applies to regional airports, which are airports in regional municipalities or interface municipalities and it applies to airports which are public use, which is to say that aircraft operators can operate into them," he said.

Mr Rich-Phillips rejected suggestions that it did not qualify for the grant because it was located on Melbourne's outer fringe in the Mornington Peninsula local government area.

"The program applies to regional airports, as defined which are airports in regional municipalities or interface municipalities," he said.

"It applies to airports which are public use, that is to say aircraft operators can operate into them.

"That's the criteria for upgrades and these are operational upgrades at airports across Victoria and that's the criteria at which this club would have been assessed."

Mr Bernardi said the aerodrome was used by emergency services.

"The police use it, the medivac people use it, they're always picking up people here from car accidents, and visiting pilots are more than welcome here," he said.

But Victoria's shadow attorney-general, Martin Pakula, said the minister had some explaining to do about the grant.

"[It is] one million dollars of taxpayers' money given to a private aero club on the urban fringe from a fund that is meant to be for public use regional airports," he said.

"The minister really has some serious probating questions to answer about this grant."

Mr Pakula called on the Government to release all the details of the application process.

Mr Bernardi said the funds had started to come through from the Government and the club was also putting in some of its own money for the upgrade.

He said the club was hoping the works would be completed by the beginning of next year.

Extracted from:

<http://www.abc.net.au/news/2014-10-08/minister-defends-million-dollar-grant-to-aero-club/5797840>

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