

RUSSELL CROWE revealed yesterday that he and businessman Peter Holmes a Court had paid the Rabbitohs more than \$200,000 last year so the club didn't have to ask South Sydney Juniors for another handout.

The disclosure came as the high-flying pair stepped up their bid to take control of the foundation club, with a question and answer session for fans at Telstra Stadium.

Crowe and Holmes a Court have proposed to take a 75 per cent stake in the club for \$3million and last week won the nod from the club board to put the offer to 4505 voting members at an extraordinary general meeting scheduled for March 19. They need 75 per cent support for the proposal to go ahead.

Crowe has been a long-time supporter of the Rabbitohs and with Holmes a Court is believed to have contributed well over \$500,000 to help the club, including bringing in a \$250,000 jersey sponsorship last year for his film Cinderella Man and making regular end-of-season grants. Last year the pair donated \$100,000 in October towards post-match functions at the club's new home ground at Telstra Stadium and gave \$126,000 a month later for the Young Bucks program, designed to retain local juniors.

The Oscar-winner took a swipe at Souths director Sol Bellear -- who is opposed to the joint takeover bid -- over comments that the club had been trading successfully without any financial aid from Crowe or Holmes a Court.

"We coughed up \$100,000 in November to make sure we actually had a balance sheet we could present to the NRL," Crowe told about 1200 fans.

"The year before that, it was another amount -- and the year before that, it was another amount.

"I'll keep giving the money, but my attitude is: 'If I'm going to pay for it, I want to have a say in how it's run'.

"Let's just get real. One hundred grand was going to knock us over last November because we didn't have it.

"That's how bad a state we were in."

Souths chief executive Shane Richardson confirmed the money provided by Crowe and Holmes a Court had saved the club from going to Souths Juniors for further assistance.

"We certainly went to him looking for help and he always comes to help every time we asked him," Richardson said.

"The money went directly towards keeping those kids at the club and enabled us to scholarship them and enabled us to show them people cared about them and wanted them at the club."

Holmes a Court handled most of the questions at the forum yesterday, with most focusing on the \$3million price tag to buy the club.

Rabbitohs patriarch George Piggins and former Souths juniors boss Henry Morris claim the club is being undersold and are trying to get members to vote against the proposal.

That opposition intensified yesterday, with Piggins calling for a government inquiry if the sale goes ahead, while a long-time backer -- the Construction, Forestry, Mining and Energy Union -- threatened to withdraw \$1million in annual funding.

"The \$3million provides a capital base so management knows that they can make long-term plans, they can set a business plan and if it takes them three to five years to achieve that, we'll back them for that three to five years," Holmes a Court said.

Holmes a Court and Crowe said they were confident of turning around the fortunes of the foundation club, which has been lagging near the bottom of the NRL competition since it was re-admitted in 2002.

The pair also said they wanted to end the bitter in-fighting and negative headlines that have dogged the club since its return in 2002.

That hope appears unlikely for the next couple of months, with Piggins supporters opposing the bid, but Crowe said he had nothing but respect for the man credited with saving the Rabbitohs from extinction.

"We might not see eye to eye, but I don't have anything against George's opinion," Crowe said.

"I don't see it in those terms because we're not engaging in that way. This is battle by disengagement.

"It's simply a choice. If they want to do it this way, great -- we'll have a go at it.

"If they want to do it another way, that's fine too. We're not going to whinge about it."