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## University Gets Caught Lobbying for Developer – Now Wants to Investigate Itself Featured

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The recent revelation that Richmond-based Kwantlen Polytechnic University has been acting as a paid lobbyist (though they eschew that label) for a highly contentious billion-and-a-half dollar real estate development atop farmland has brought to the fore some serious ethical questions. Namely, should publicly funded academic institutions be engaging in this sort of behaviour, and if so, do they have a duty to disclose such financial arrangements to the public and the bodies they lobby.

Documents recently obtained via Freedom of Information request on behalf of a group of citizens opposing the development of a 500-plus acre parcel of farmland in Tsawwassen's Boundary Bay reveal a multi-tiered contractual arrangement between Kwantlen and developer Century Group. The Memorandum of Understanding (click [here](#) to see) included cash payments and other bonuses in exchange for the university extolling the virtues of a proposal to build 1,900 homes on the farmland known as the Southlands property...or as the document phrases it, to "articulate the sustainability of the land use proposal as part of the re-zoning application."

The battle over this land extends back several decades, throughout which time the people of Tsawwassen and agricultural advocates across the region have steadfastly opposed the plan and successfully blocked development. Kent Spencer broke this latest chapter of the Southlands saga in [The Province](#) last week, adding the actual dollar figures to the details spelled out in the formerly secret M.O.U. document. It appears the university got \$50,000 up front for its efforts, and would receive an additional \$100,000 should the developer achieve the rezoning it's seeking from the municipality to move the project forward; should the complex be built, Kwantlen would receive some vaguely defined benefits such as the use of an educational building on the property, built and owned by the developer – and the ability to do some horticultural research projects on the land that isn't taken up by houses and roads (approximately 200 acres out of 540).

What has Kwantlen done so far to earn its fee? In addition to some "research" into the benefits of the proposal, a couple of professors from the school's Institute of Sustainable Horticulture, Kent Mullinix and Arthur Fallick, have made favourable presentations to the municipality of Delta (of which Tsawwassen is a part), and other groups like Capilano University. Just having the university's name attached to the concept is clearly of substantial value to the developer's bid.

The fact that the university kept the deal secret is worse than the deal itself. While Century Group's president Sean Hodgins – one of two signatories of the recently unearthed document, the other being Kwantlen president David Atkinson – has declined to comment in the media on the recent brouhaha, Kwantlen reps initially defended the university's actions. But it appears now, as the story refuses to go away, that the university is changing its position and at least conceding the possibility that there may be something untoward about this deal.

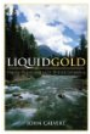
Now [The Province](#) is reporting that Atkinson, in a misguided attempt at damage control, is [calling for an investigation](#) into the matter. An investigation is certainly appropriate – just not by Atkinson and Kwantlen... seeing how it is Atkinson's own signature on the secret document at the root of the whole controversy. Mr. Atkinson apparently thinks it's fine and dandy to investigate himself. That he can't see the conflict there is baffling.

Perhaps the most damning evidence against the university lies in the chronology of events:

- May 20, 2009: Century Group and Kwantlen sign M.O.U.
- December 3, 2009: Kwantlen profs make presentation to Delta Council (without disclosing their financial relationship with the developer)
- March 2010: Tsawwassen resident files F.O.I. request with Kwantlen, obtaining the M.O.U. in late March
- April 9, 2010: Century Group posts M.O.U. on their website
- July 2010: The story breaks – only then does the university comment on its deal with the developer, when questioned by the media.

The first question that comes mind is why did Century Group post the M.O.U. on their site just weeks after their partner, Kwantlen, received the F.O.I. request for the until-then secret document – nearly a full year after the deal was inked. Could it have been to create some veneer of defence against the accusations of secrecy that were sure to follow the release of the document? The time to disclose things is *before* you get caught, not after.

While no longer in the Agricultural Land Reserve, the Southlands is designated for agricultural use by the municipality of Delta. The developer, who has tried for decades unsuccessfully to develop the property, is now rushing to get Delta to amend its own community plan and rezone the property for housing before Metro Vancouver completes its overhauled Green Zone plan, which is likely to entrench the agricultural designation of the Southlands, perhaps finishing off the development bid for good. The plan, it appears, was to get the municipality to fast-track the rezoning, as quietly as possible. It is thus ironic that this stealth strategy has in fact blown the story wide open and likely done far more harm than good to the developer's plans – not to mention the university's reputation.



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