

THE TRI-CITY NEWS

Land exchange deal proposed to save a golf course

By Jeff Nagel Black Press

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Part of Pacific Spirit Regional Park should be handed over to the Musqueam Indian band for development in order to save Point Grey's University Golf Course from the same fate, says an influential group of golfers.

The idea, which is certain to draw fierce protest from park lovers, is being advanced by a group led by prominent B.C. Liberal financier Marty Zlotnik.

He fears the provincial government is on the verge of turning the public golf course over to the Musqueam to settle a legal dispute.

The province had originally tried to sell the golf course to UBC, but the Musqueam won a court decision that quashed the transfer because the band's aboriginal rights weren't adequately considered.

Aboriginal relations and reconciliation minister Mike de Jong has confirmed negotiations to compensate the Musqueam may involve the golf course.

Instead of offering up the 120-acre course, Zlotnik and his group want an equal sized part in the southeast corner of Pacific Spirit Regional Park offered to the Musqueam.

"It's not my first choice," Zlotnik says. "But the government refuses to talk about cash."

He said the six per cent of the park that would be given up would be much closer to other Musqueam band lands along the north arm of the Fraser River.

And he suggests it could be developed immediately – in contrast to the golf course deal that's said to preclude redevelopment until 2033 – an advantage worth hundreds of millions of dollars to the band.

Point Grey residents and other golf course defenders fear the band would turn the green eastern gateway to UBC into high-rise condos, a shopping centre, casino or forest of billboards.

Zlotnik's increasingly political campaign to block the golf course handover has put him at odds with the area MLA – Premier Gordon Campbell – who is also his friend.

"It's not helping me out at all," he said of that relationship. "The government has made a decision that golfers are an easy target versus the public as a whole that has an interest in the park."

He's commissioned a poll of the region's residents he hopes will demonstrate a public appetite to sacrifice part of the park to save the golf course.

The concept hasn't been raised at the Metro Vancouver parks committee, which oversees the regional parks.

Langley Coun. Gayle Martin, who chairs the committee, said word of Zlotnik's proposal "took my breath away."

She called Pacific Spirit a "very important" park to the region.

"I'm not sure that I'd go for that," Martin said, calling the idea "unbelievable."

Metro Vancouver spokesman Bill Morrell said senior administrators have had a confidential briefing from the province on what's being considered, but haven't been asked to agree to anything.

Zlotnik, however, claims Metro Vancouver, has already agreed to give up 35 acres of the park to the Musqueam.

The Point Grey dispute could be a harbinger of battles to come as negotiators begin to close in on other urban treaties in the region.

The first deal struck with the Tsawwassen includes contentious removals of land from the Agricultural Land Reserve.

The University Golf Course fight raises the question of whether regional parkland or other publicly important lands could also be put on the table.

"If they're prepared to do it with the University Golf Course," Zlotnik asks, "where will they be prepared to do it next?"

Unlike rural land claim settlements, where Crown land is abundant, most of the Lower Mainland is developed, leaving few options to provide a land base for urban treaties.

Metro Vancouver officials won't directly answer whether regional parks they run could be on the table in treaty negotiations.

"How aboriginal land claims are going to be resolved and what is or isn't on the table is far better dealt with by the province," Morrell said.

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