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Large Langley land deal goes down in secret

Critics refuse to toast sale of Dickson Pit to wealthy Martini family

Kent Spencer; with a file from Glenda Luymes

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Dickson Pit, a 38-hectare tract of public land in Langley, has been quietly sold for just \$2 million to a member of a wealthy local family, The Province has learned.

The sale was approved in secret by Langley Township council and has not been announced publicly.

But angry Langley residents who have discovered the hush-hush deal are questioning the transaction between the well-to-do Martini family member and the township council.

"That's an awful low cost for 92 acres," says Larri Woodrow, a 69-year-old who has hiked the area since the 1970s. "You've heard all about Burns Bog. This is another unique bog."

The pit, a peat bog in North Langley that is home to red-legged frogs and great blue herons, was sold to a member of the Martini family on May 30, 2007, documents show.

Under the deal, the buyer had to pay \$1.5 million for the land and make a \$500,000 donation to Metro Vancouver regional parks. Of the 38 hectares of land, neighbouring Derby Reach Regional Park is to get nine hectares. Twelve hectares must be maintained as wetlands and 17 hectares are available to the Martinis.

While it's not clear to what extent the buyer might be able to profit by reselling or developing their 17 hectares and marketing it with the 29 acres of conservation area as an added attraction, people in the real-estate industry say the package could potentially be worth tens of millions of dollars.

"This is a total wilderness where you can escape and relate to nature. We need chunks like this for our souls to survive. We have too little open space already," said Woodrow.

"It bothers me, because this was in public ownership. We could have made all of it a park," he said.

Woodrow also objected to the veil of secrecy that has surrounded the deal. His questions to staff have gone unanswered; council members say they cannot speak because the matter is "in camera."

Woodrow says he learned of the sale through "gossip" in the community.

"A whole lot of us don't like the secrecy. It rules us out as members of the community," he said.

The family that made the purchase is headed by Langley businessman Ron Martini, an Italian immigrant. In 1970, he founded Starline Windows, which now bills itself as

Western Canada's largest window manufacturer.

Land title documents show the Dickson Pit site is now owned by Ron's son, Thomas Martini.

Since the purchase, the land has increased to \$2.3 million in assessed value, according to B.C. Assessments.

The land is located at 216 Street and 104 Avenue. There is no civic address; no roads lead to it. The 3.6-hectare Martini home borders Dickson Pit on the southern side.

Ron Martini did not return repeated calls. There has been no disclosure of what plans he may have for the undeveloped land.

"We don't know what he's going to do," said Woodrow.

Township Parks Manager Al Neufeld said he is "not really sure" what the buyer intends either.

"The land would have to go through normal development proposals" if the owner intended to build on it, Neufeld said.

The property is now zoned rural, but is not part of the Agricultural Land Reserve.

Neufeld said the upland part of the site could be developed.

Critics say the sale price was far too low for a property that could be worth tens of millions in the future.

Glen Tomblin, who has run for Langley Township council in the past, said the transaction follows a pattern used when council deals with land sales.

"We don't get for-sale signs in the township and a notice we're going to tender. Land deals always come through the back door," he said.

"Unusual land deals are usual in Langley. There's a way of doing business. People are in a malaise here; they accept it.

"These guys [on council] are costing us millions of dollars.

"The greatest asset we have as taxpayers is our land base," Tomblin said. "As a businessman, you have to wonder, how do you get in on this?"

Tomblin said other questionable land deals include:

- n Selling three-quarters of an acre last month for just \$12,000 with no auction;

- n A deal in 2005 to purchase the 70-hectare Redwoods Golf Course for \$6.7 million. The township will not own the land until 2025, by which time Tomblin said interest charges will bring the total cost to about \$12 million.

A Surrey realtor, who was not able to comment directly on the latest deal, said building lots with services sell for "\$280,000 to \$325,000." Medium-density family subdivisions can accommodate up to six lots per acre.

Scott Williams of Money Saver Realty said a 14.11-acre parcel sold in November for

\$910,000, or \$64,500 an acre.

"It's my opinion that the current market value for large land parcels in North Langley would be between \$50,000 to \$65,000 per acre," he said.

The buyer from the Martini family got the 17-hectare parcel for \$47,700 an acre. If the 12 hectares deeded to them as a protected area are taken into the equation, that figure falls to about \$29,000 an acre.

Politicians at the township said they were bound by rules of confidentiality since the sale was approved in camera, or secretly.

The same rules applied to Metro Vancouver parks chair Gayle Martin, a Langley city councillor, she said.

"We are involved -- on the periphery," said Martin. "We are looking to add land to Derby Reach. We have to go through certain actions [to get the land]. We will go public as soon as they are finalized."

Derby Reach is a regional park bordering Dickson Pit that is now about 300 hectares in size.

Sharon Meneely, chair of Derby Reach park's advisory committee, said at-risk species in the bog include western screech owls, red-legged frogs and great blue herons.

"Wetlands are among the most important life-support systems on earth," she wrote council in an undated letter. "Our public lands are keystones for conservation in Langley."

A township spokesman said Mayor Kurt Alberts was not available for comment.

Acting Mayor Charlie Fox did not return calls.

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WHO ARE THE MARTINIS?

The life story of the Martini family is one of an Italian immigrant who made good.

"He is a wonderful guy. They are good people," said neighbour Larri Woodrow of family patriarch Ron Martini. "He has made a success of himself. He has accumulated a lot of property over the years."

Woodrow has many reservations about the Dickson Pit land deal, but says he is "not upset with Ron and Marie" because the purchase was a good deal for them.

The Martinis live in a large home in the 10300-block 216 Street, which borders the Dickson Pit area now in family hands.

In 1970, the elder Martini founded Starline Windows, which makes windows and doors for customers in Western Canada, the U.S. and Japan. The company has a staff of 300 employees, with offices in Langley, Victoria, Nanaimo, Kelowna, Washington state and California.

WHAT DO YOU THINK?

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