

# Battle Ground

Development of the Endowment Lands may be fattening UBC's coffers, but it's ticking off many of the neighbours

BY ANDREW FINDLAY

It's a sunny May afternoon, and Judy Williams and I are making our way down UBC's precipitous Trail #6, a route Williams has walked hundreds, perhaps thousands, of times. We move through massive old-growth conifers, past a wooden bench carved by Wreck Beach regular Michael Asti-Rose. A briny scent floats up from the tidal flats. Williams, the pugnacious chair of the Wreck Beach Preservation Society (and the leading advocate for British Columbia's only official clothing-optional public beach), has been coming here since 1967, when she discovered this sunbathing paradise. More recently, she's adopted a new role: she has become a relentless critic of development on the UBC campus—projects like the 17- and 18-storey student residences rising up just across Southwest Marine Drive.

The mere mention of those towers is enough to send Williams, a retired teacher (M.Ed., UBC, 1976), into an apoplectic, expletive-sprinkled rage.

When we reach beach level she strides among the dunes and driftwood like a small-town preacher with her congregation, greeting old friends sunning their backsides in the bracing spring air. Her wrists festooned with an array of bracelets and bands, an ornate wooden Amazon walking stick in her hand, she leads me along the breakwater to a spot where you can see the glass-and-steel summits of the offending towers above the canopy of broadleaf maples, red cedars, and Douglas firs at the top of the cliff.

To someone who's not a member of Wreck Beach's bohemian fraternity, the towers' offence is not readily apparent. At issue is not the prospect of hormonal students spying from their top-floor suites for signs of exposed flesh; rather, it's the impact that these phallic intrusions have on the view from the beach. "Part of the allure of Wreck Beach is that you get a sense of wilderness and remoteness even though you're in a major metropolis," Williams explains. "The towers were actually supposed to be 20 storeys, but we got them scaled back. I

tell you, it's been a history of butting heads with the authorities at UBC." These days it seems every time a construction crew shows up on campus, an army of critics is standing by to launch an attack. Nobody is arguing against improved student accommodation, but developments like the Marine Drive towers are symbolic of a larger problem at UBC, which is increasingly criticized for being preoccupied with making money from development while neglecting its community responsibilities.

Education and research may be UBC's ostensible *raison d'être*, but the university, through its UBC Properties Trust, can act like a real-estate company. In 2001 the trust, formerly a leasing agency, began to focus on property development. Overall, the UBCPT has inked 99-year leases with private developers wanting a piece of prime West Side real estate; the resulting construction projects are worth (so far) \$1.5 billion, making the UBCPT one of the largest land developers in the province. In the process, it has dumped hundreds of millions into the university's endowment fund while overseeing construction of academic buildings as well as a residential and retail community known as University Town that, by 2025, will have added 7,000 housing units and boosted the campus's residential population to almost 20,000. (Roughly 7,800 called UBC home in 2001.)

Along the way, Williams has battled the UBCPT over any number of issues: the felling of old-growth trees, the height of condos and proposed hotels, the management of wastewater, and the destruction of heritage buildings. Nor is she alone in her criticism. In 2006, at the request of the Wreck Beach Preservation Society and the Pacific Spirit Park Society, UBC professors Royann Petrell, Ken Hall, and Patrick Condon coauthored a scathing review of stormwater management on campus, criticizing the university for falling short of the "strong commitments" outlined in its official community plan (OCP), meant to guide everything from density and building height to water management and transportation infrastructure. "There is no evidence of substantive progress in meeting the OCP and CCP [comprehensive community plan] commitments," the academics wrote, adding that the developments they examined lacked adequate pollutant controls and had made "negligible progress" in recycling and reusing rainwater. They also noted extensive tree removal without replacement.

Clearly, these senior faculty members expect more from a university that touts sustainability as a cornerstone of its planning and development.

"UBC is more about real-estate development than it is about education these days," Judy Williams says. "It makes me want to burn my diploma."

In recent years, residents, activists, students, and faculty have criticized the properties trust for more than just its buildings; they disparage its mode of operation, which they fear may be symptomatic of a larger trend at UBC. The trust answers to the university's 21-strong board of governors, a mix of appointees and elected members. The problem is one of accountability: UBC presents an unusual urban development experiment. It has the appearance of a distinct municipality but lacks the governance and oversight associated with an incorporated town, operating instead as a monopolistic entity that is at once planner, developer, and regulator. UBC has its own OCP, but unlike, say, in the city of Vancouver, citizens who take issue with development at UBC have no straightforward avenue of expression, no single window for venting their abundant frustration.

"The real issue is that the university operates like a little fiefdom with a very weak governance structure," says Rick Goodacre, executive director of the Heritage B.C. In the summer of 2006, the university authorized the destruction of the historic Chancellor Building (1927) to make way for a condominium development. The 80-year-old monument, Goodacre says, likely would have received protection within a municipality fortified by proper checks and balances.

Excessive noise pollution has also prompted some of UBC's neighbours to take up arms. For almost a decade the properties trust has run afoul of residents along Southwest Marine Drive who are tired of the ceaseless convoy of trucks shuttling construction supplies and equipment to and from campus projects. Liz Haan, a long-time area resident, says the auditory assault from the 350 to 400 trucks that rumble past her home each day has left her nerves shattered. "I call UBC the neighbour from hell. They've been completely unresponsive," Haan says, "I'm not a happy person right now."

Then there's the issue of early childhood education. Faculty, staff, and students living on campus argue that the orgy of market-housing development on campus has come without a commensurate provision of essential community services, such as day care and schooling. Campus parents have been waiting between two and three years to secure a day care spot for their tykes. Although the university has committed to building five facilities, it's come too late for some, says Lisa McIntosh Sundstrom, a political-science professor who represents faculty on the UBC Daycare Parent Council.

"They're obviously making money hand over fist from developing property, but they've got to develop adequate community services," says McIntosh Sundstrom, who has two preschoolers of her own. "It's a terrible situation. It has people quitting their jobs or living with substandard childcare."

Earlier this year the university received a slap in the face over grade schools. Despite having made a promise in its South Campus Neighbourhood Plan to fund the renovation of the old National Research Council building into a badly needed high school, the university dragged its heels. So the Vancouver School Board proposed to sell Queen Elizabeth Annex, a popular Dunbar elementary school, to help pay for the estimated \$30-million retrofit. The perception spread that a neighborhood school was being sacrificed to support burgeoning growth on campus. Although the VSB committed to keeping Queen Elizabeth Annex open, Dunbar parents were still fuming at UBC for seeming to put its bottom line ahead of the needs of schoolkids.

The uncertain future of the UBC Farm is another potential powder keg. If the university's board of governors sees fit to tear up the experimental farm, which the OCP identifies as "future housing reserve," the properties trust will again receive an earful. "The information we're getting from the administration is that there will be a farm, but there's a sense that the farm will be moved or shrunk in size," says Gavin Wright, a farm spokesman and graduate student in the Faculty of Land and Food Systems. He accuses the university of being less than transparent on the farm's future. The fact that this spring UBC administrators quietly commissioned a land-use study for South Campus that could include a proposal to relocate the farm doesn't reassure campus green thumbs.

Perhaps the testy situation at UBC was best summarized by Kris Nichols, a GVRD planner who in 2006 prepared a report on governance for the regional district's land use and transportation committee: "The key issues raised by the public," he wrote, "include a lack of accountability of UBC, lack of a democratic voice for campus residents, inadequate services for a residential community, flawed public processes, and inadequate planning systems to protect Pacific Spirit Park."

If Judy Williams represents the prickly grassroots opposition to UBC development, her nemesis is Al Poettcker. As president and CEO of the UBCPT, Poettcker is fulfilling the trust's mandate; that is, replacing what was once an isolated academic island with a lively and inspiring community where staff, faculty, students, and regular citizens can live, work, eat, play, shop, and study. The UBCPT is housed in a bland, two-storey brick building on Great Northern Way. Poettcker is a polished, politically adroit, amicable man intensely proud not only of being a UBC alumnus (B.Comm., 1969) but also of the

achievements of the properties trust. After serving as a volunteer board member from 1988 to 1996, he assumed the presidency. He condenses the role of the trust into a succinct mission statement: "To assist UBC to meet its goals."

"How do we do that?" Poettcker asks, stroking his red paisley tie and settling into a boardroom chair. "We enlarge the endowment and help the university create a community."

That community, University Town, includes distinct neighbourhoods scattered around the campus: Chancellor Place, University Boulevard, East Campus, Hampton Place, Hawthorn Place, South Campus, and North Campus. Poettcker vehemently defends the trust's development record in achieving a sustainable campus community that's much different from the institution he experienced as an undergrad. In the 1960s, he says, there were 15,000 ground-level parking spaces for 25,000 students. Today there are approximately 9,500 parking spots for 35,000 students. Poettcker calls it a "stunning achievement at reducing car use." (Even the GVRD gives credit to UBC, lauding the university for increasing transit ridership by 42 percent between 1997 and 2006, and more or less adhering to its commitment to target 20 percent of new housing for rental, half of which is meant for non-market or student accommodation.)

Poettcker also dismisses criticism of the trust's environmental stewardship, saying that he would proudly hold up the quality of UBC's stormwater for comparison with any other jurisdiction's. As for noise complaints from residents along Southwest Marine Drive, he maintains that the trust has endeavoured to accommodate their concerns. However, he says, construction requires trucks, and trucks can be noisy. Mention of Judy Williams and the Wreck Beach anti-development contingent brings a barely detectable smile to his face: "We're never going to keep Judy Williams happy 100 percent of the time."

In a way, the stage was set for a showdown over campus development long before Williams and Poettcker were born. In 1920, the provincial government set aside 1,200 Point Grey hectares, and over the next 50 years transferred 400 hectares through Crown grants directly to UBC. In 1988 the GVRD transformed 730 hectares of the so-called Endowment Lands into Pacific Spirit Regional Park. However it wasn't until the 1980s that UBC administrators started to truly view the ground underfoot as a gold mine.

At the UBC Treasury, associate vice-president Byron Braley, like Poettcker, sweeps aside critics of campus development. In 1999, the properties trust completed its first major project, Hampton Place, home to some 950 market-housing units. Since then, Braley says, the trust's development activities have contributed \$200 million to

the endowment, which translates into roughly \$10 million in annual student bursaries, research grants, and other disbursements. In an age when universities must devise increasingly creative funding models, which often include relationships with corporate interests, Braley makes no apologies for development on campus; rather, he believes students, faculty, and staff would expect no less from UBC's leaders than that they parlay the institution's valuable Point Grey property into liquid assets to support educational programs. "Twenty percent of the UBC endowment comes from the good work of the properties trust," Braley says. "We've been sitting on this land for a long time, and when we finally decide to do something with it and leverage the land, there's all this kaffuffle."

**AL POETTCKER IS** rather cavalier about the issue of governance and accountability, arguing that the system, in his opinion, works perfectly well. But by any yardstick it's hopelessly ambiguous. Even Stephen Owen, UBC's new vice-president of external, legal, and community relations, scratches his forehead. "It's not a classic model," he admits. "I've been here for nine months, and I'm still learning it."

There's the University Neighbourhoods Association, the UBC board of governors, a single elected member on the GVRD board (UBC is in Area A of the GVRD), and a joint committee composed of three UBC governors and three GVRD members. The perception of unwieldy governance and lack of accountability hasn't escaped the notice of UBC; according to Owen, the university is examining the labyrinthine workings of campus development and democracy, though it hasn't committed to any timeline for change.

The administration is considering three options: merging with the City of Vancouver; asking the province to create a separate UBC municipality; and maintaining the status quo. That last option means UBC would remain a curious entity, home to booming development that doesn't answer directly to an elected body. When you consider the heights to which Vancouver real-estate prices have soared and the dearth of developable land, a close look at the machinations of development and democracy at UBC's prized Point Grey property—some of the most attractive land in Metro Vancouver—seems long overdue.

In the meantime, as the trucks thunder down Southwest Marine Drive and the construction cranes pierce the Point Grey skyline, University Town expands like a bacterial culture on a Petri dish.

Poettcker says that UBC will experience the growing pains of any town on the move, but believes that's the price of transforming a stale, car-dependent campus into a vibrant community of residents and learners.

Back at Trail #6, where forest meets sand, Judy Williams still finds sanctuary on the dunes of Wreck Beach. To her, those student towers—indeed, any new campus development—are just more signs that UBC has lost its way. To Al Poettcker, that same steel and concrete represents an enriched educational war chest and a brave new learning and living community. UBC has become a battleground, and the battle does not seem likely to end anytime soon.