

Campus Crusader

BY ROB HOWATSON

As a student at Vancouver's John Oliver Secondary, Al Poettcker was occasionally forced to study in the school's notorious 'barn' – a creaky wooden three-storey annex built in the '20s. He graduated to UBC in 1964, only to encounter more outdated classrooms, including WWII era huts (of which a few still stand) and a giant drafty armoury that served as an exam hall until it was demolished in the mid-'90s.

Today, however, it's payback time for Poettcker. As CEO of UBC Properties Trust (UBCPT) – a UBC-owned company that acquires, develops and manages all of the university's real estate assets – the 58 year old is heading up a \$1.2 billion makeover of the campus. More than just a nip and tuck, the University Town Project aims to transform UBC from a commuting campus into a school with a sizable residential community – and not just for students.

Seven thousand housing units, organized into eight new neighbourhoods, will be built at UBC, essentially doubling the current campus population by 2021. Not to mention the many academic buildings sprouting up on the Point. Poettcker gets to wear the senior hardhat during this building frenzy because – as he puts it – he earned the right BCom.

"In 1966 BC was coming out of a relatively severe recession and it looked like there was going to be a growing demand for developers," says Poettcker. "UBC's business faculty had this new Urban Land program. I enrolled and was the best decision I could have made."

Following convocation, he cut his chops with Marathon Realty before serving with a variety of development heavy weights through the '70s – helping to develop millions of square metres of office buildings and shopping centres. In 1982 Expo hired him to assemble land for the '86 world's fair. He had six months to secure half the shoreline of False Creek. "That project was everything that makes this industry fun," says the longtime Kerrisdale resident and father of three.

Today his job doesn't involve much land acquisition (UBC already owns it all), nor a ton of marketing (for market housing, UBCPT leases the land to developers and lets them do the work) – but there are still plenty of hurdles. For instance, building at a university means dealing with a most vocal and educated brand of NUMBYism from

students, faculty and residents. In 2003, heated opposition to the University Boulevard Neighbourhood plan, which called for 18-storey towers and extending the boulevard through the centre of the campus to Marine Drive, made for many a noisy public meeting. (UBC has since trimmed down the proposal.)

Poettcker says that year-long consultation was the most controversial project he's faced since co-founding UBCPT in 1988. But the most frustrating one for him personally has been the Wreck Beach Society's opposition to the proposed student residence towers on Marine Drive. "The Society does not want the mechanical penthouse to be seen from the beach's average low tide mark," says Poettcker, "and that's presenting a real challenge for us because it affects costs. Meanwhile there are 4,000 students waiting for accommodations."

The patient CEO says his offices are located at the former Finning lands on Great Northern Way for the convenience of downtown-based contractors. But with three of eight university neighbourhoods still to come, Poettcker must be glad his desk is a 15-minute drive off campus.