

# First Nations, municipalities, universities emerging players in Metro Vancouver land development

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Phase 1 of UniverCity on Burnaby Mountain. The housing development is on land leased from SU, an example of public agencies and First nations working with developers to get benefits from surplus lands.

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“In the last couple of decades, we’ve seen a real shift in who is undertaking large-scale land development and why,” said Gordon Harris, president of the Simon Fraser Community Trust and an urban planner.

“What we are seeing is less about the acquisition of land for the purpose of changing and intensifying its use, and more about the decision of land-rich organizations to create value from surplus land and to use that to support the core activities and functions of those large-scale organizations, or for other reasons such as advancing social and community goals,” said Harris.

He and three panelists spoke Thursday at a session sponsored by the Vancouver chapter of the Commercial Real Estate Development Association.

The landlords who are conducting these atypical deals have been in the spotlight recently as Vancouver Coastal Health signed an agreement with the Onni Group for the sale of its Pearson-Dogwood lands, a four-block parcel at 57th Avenue along the Cambie corridor. One estimate puts the deal in the \$200-million range.

First Nation deals include Tsawwassen’s agreement with Ivanhoe Cambridge to develop a \$600-million shopping centre on treaty lands through a 99-year lease, and the high-profile federal government settlement with the Squamish, Musqueam and Tsleil-Waututh First Nations for the Jericho military lands and two other smaller parcels in the city of Vancouver. The three First Nations are 50-per-cent partners in the \$300-million deal with the federal Crown corporation Canada Lands Company.

While the groups are making money from these deals, they are also seeking other benefits. For example, the Tsawwassen First Nation is seeking jobs and training for its members.

The Tsawwassen estimate that a full residential, commercial and industrial build-out of its plans for their 742 hectares of treaty lands will inject \$548 million annually into its economy.

“The success has to be translated back into our community, not only for current generations, but for 100, 200, 300 years,” said Chris Hartman, president of the Economic Development Corp. for the Tsawwassen First Nation.

Hartman said he believes that partnerships with private companies can be successful even though developers are more familiar with land deals that involve straight purchases.

He noted that one can be very creative with long-term lease development deals.

Surrey City Development Corp. president Aubrey Kelly said while there was initial criticism from the private development community that Surrey was competing with the

private sector, that has died down, noting his group has worked with developers Bosa, Century, Townline and Beedie.

Stef Schiedon, director of real estate for the Fraser Health Authority, said health authorities are among the largest land holders in the province.

“I think we are among those hidden groups in real estate,” said Schiedon, noting the group he heads has 700 employees and carries out leasing and property management for four health authorities.

He said profits are invested into health care and in the case of the Pearson-Dogwood lands, a parcel of land was retained for future health care use.

For the Simon Fraser Community Trust, which developed the 10-year-old UniverCity on Burnaby Mountain adjacent to SFU, now with 3,500 inhabitants, profits are plowed back into an endowment fund that supports teaching and research. The University of B.C. has also used land-lease revenues to help feed a \$1.1-billion endowment fund.

“The real issue is we get to do this once every 100 years. Let’s get it right. And that’s not just take the money and run: what can we give back and put back in the community and make this whole region a richer place,” said Harris.