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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

