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Big donor quits board after plan to dump millions of tonnes of toxic soil in Peel region revealed

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One of the state's biggest political donors has quit a board post on a regional development commission after an explosive meeting in which he tried to secure a deal to dump millions of tonnes of toxic soil in the Peel region.

Within hours of questions being asked of Transport Minister Rita Saffioti and Regions Minister Alannah MacTiernan about the meeting, Peel Development Commission's deputy chairman Greg Poland resigned.

Greg Poland resigned from his position on the Peel Development Commission board following questions raised about an unorthodox meeting held in January.

At the bizarre meeting in January Mr Poland told a local business owner how to acquire a valuable parcel of land in Myalup from the government without going to tender.

But first the business owner would have to solve a political headache for the government by facilitating the dumping of up to eight million tonnes of toxic soil from the Forrestfield Airport Link project on his land in Waroona.

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In the meeting, which Mr Poland described as unorthodox and in which he allegedly asked a public servant to stop taking notes, Mr Poland said Ms Saffioti and Ms MacTiernan would push through a deal.

Mr Poland claimed he had been asked by the ministers to help dump the soil, which was looming as a contentious issue for the government.

As part of the deal outlined by Mr Poland, the government would transfer a parcel of land in Myalup to the business owner without going to tender.

The business owner could use the Myalup land to mine building sand, which Mr Poland estimated could be worth up to \$600 million.

Part of Mr Poland's role as deputy chair of PDC was to "lead the coordination in the region coordinating the multiplicity of government and non-government efforts," a statement from Mr Poland's lawyer said.

"You will know that the charter of the PDC is to work to ensure conditions for growth within the Peel Region including economic growth."

Mr Poland denied "ordering" the PDC officer at the meeting to stop taking notes.

"The officer in question took no notes of the meeting," his lawyer said.

"It was not necessary to take notes as it was an informal, private coffee meeting at the Subiaco Hotel to facilitate a private discussion where Mr Poland was giving advice to [the business owner] to submit any relevant proposal to the Peel Development Commission for board approval."

During the meeting, Mr Poland described the access he enjoyed to Ms Saffioti because of his role on the PDC board, through his business interests, and as a founding member of the Labor Leaders' Forum, a controversial fundraising organisation within WA Labor.

Mr Poland suggested to the business owner how to propose the deal in a way that would be acceptable to the government and said he would meet with Ms Saffioti and Ms MacTiernan about it.

Although Mr Poland said the deal may not ultimately be viable, he said the government would be in the business owner's debt if he could help solve the problem of the toxic sand and Ms Saffioti would push through the deal.

Mr Poland brushed aside concerns raised at the meeting that a local shire president may oppose the plan.

During the meeting, Mr Poland said power in the government was exercised by Premier Mark McGowan, Treasurer Ben Wyatt, Ms Saffioti and Ms MacTiernan and the opinions of other ministers and departments were irrelevant.

He said he had been giving advice about the "ability of a Peel Region business to apply directly with the government to work with the government (in a public/private partnership)".

"This is in the context where the Peel Region has a shortage of business sand capable for use for the construction industry," Mr Poland's lawyer said.

"Information Mr Poland was given was that the cost of dealing with the contaminated sand was estimated to be \$300 million. [The business owner] estimated the cost [of] the mining licence would be \$500,000 and the transportation costs to move the toxic waste to his former mining site so as to dispose of it would be in the order of \$25 million.

"The simple economics was that presented as an opportunity to save the taxpayers of Western Australia \$275,000,000 in exchange for which the government would give up \$500,000 for the mining licence and the cost of transportation. This is in a context where the government could obtain royalties from the mining of sand.

"Mr Poland is a donor to both the Liberal Party and the Labor Party. His political affiliation was irrelevant to the support for this proposal. As deputy chair of the Peel Development Commission, it was part of Mr Poland's role to help and assist with these interactions between Peel business people and the government. Mr Poland took his role as deputy chair seriously. He would see anyone he needed to see to support any idea such as that discussed with [the business owner] that had such a clear and evident benefit for the community generally, the Peel Region and taxpayers."

Ms Saffioti said she had been unaware of the land swap deal, and did not meet with Mr Poland regularly.

"Mr Poland's reported comments are incorrect and I am personally insulted by them," the minister said.

"They do not reflect how I as a minister operate, or how this government operates."

Ms MacTiernan echoed Ms Saffioti's statement and said Mr Poland's comments were "completely improper" and did not represent the government.

"I was not involved in any discussions on this matter," she said.

"Mr Poland has accepted that his position is untenable and he has today offered his resignation."

Mr Poland was appointed to the board of PDC by Ms MacTiernan after Labor won the 2017 election.

Over the past 10 years he donated more than \$200,000 to political parties, but was part of a public falling out between a number of prominent WA businessmen and former premier Colin Barnett prior to the last election.

The PDC board is chaired by former City of Mandurah mayor Paddi Creevey and the current mayor Rhys Williams also serves on the board.

Ms Creevey said the organisation had been approached by business to discuss land use matters in the Peel, including the potential to accommodate spoil from the Forrestfield airport link project.

"The Public Transport Authority has advised that the Peel region is not suitable for spoil disposal," she said.

"The Peel Development Commission will therefore not be pursuing this matter any further."

In a letter received from Mr Poland's lawyer, the former PDC deputy chairman complained that he had been constantly attacked and undermined in his role.

He said a request for comment from *WAtoday* for this story was "the last straw", and he had tendered his resignation to the Minister.