

## Noodles, koalas and land deals



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The generous donation served up by the Hot Wok Food Makers company to the Queensland Labor Party suggested a link to the hospitality industry.

But the company's director Godfrey Mantle had more cooking than hot noodles.

The prominent Brisbane restaurant owner was hoping to reach an agreement with the Queensland government over the state's first biodiversity offset - a deal that involved swapping koala habitat for permission to develop land near an environmentally sensitive coastal lake on the Sunshine Coast.

Yesterday, Mr Mantle denied any connection between Hot Wok's \$26,000 donation and the decision early this year by Queensland Local Government Minister Paul Lucas to approve the offset deal involving 140 hectares of land near Lake Weyba at Noosaville.

But the scenario is typical in the confusing world of the state's political donations, which often involve developers donating hundreds of thousands of dollars via obscurely named companies to the major parties just before government approval of their projects.

And while Queensland's white shoe brigade-era characters may have largely faded away, the identity of those contributing to the major parties in a timely manner has emerged as a major issue in the coming election.

Last week, Liberal National Party leader Campbell Newman came under fire when it was revealed that the LNP's Forward Brisbane Leadership fund received donations from five different entities, which were all linked back to local developer Philip Usher.

The Usher-linked donations from a variety of companies including a local nursery and plumbing business were made before the LNP-led Brisbane City Council planning committee approved 20 and 12 story towers for one of Usher's developments.

They "raise serious questions", Premier Anna Bligh said after the story broke last week.

These donations are not exclusive to the LNP.

The largest private donor to Labor's campaign in the first half of last year was Mr Mantle's \$3 dollar company Hot Wok Food Makers Pty Ltd, according to the most up-to-date list of donors from the Queensland Electoral Commission.

The donation appears on the ALP's electoral return spreadsheet directly above a much smaller contribution from another Mantle-owned company, Northbrook Corporation, which donated the amount of \$2750 to Queensland Labor for fundraising including sponsorships.

Around the time of these donations, Mr Mantle's Northbrook Corporation was engaged in delicate negotiations with the state government over the bio-diversity offset for land near Lake Weyba area - a large saltwater sandy lake which is home to a variety of sensitive flora and fauna.

Less than six months earlier, the Sunshine Coast council had voted 10 to one against a bio-diversity offset for the site saying it was "likely to lead to a development outcome that does not provide a net benefit to koala conservation values in the area".

A council assessment report at the time noted that the development of the nominated site did not comply with state interests and the protection of conservation or rural land, as it contained 78 per cent of "valuable koala habitat".

But late last year, Mr Lucas gave "support in principle" for the area to be offset for the purposes of "koala conservation".

And early this year, Mr Lucas issued a press release confirming the site as the state's first ever bio-diversity offset, saying:

"...by coming to these sorts of arrangements we can protect our native flora and fauna and maintain and build environment corridors in southeast Queensland," he said on February 6.

"This land swap if it goes ahead, will effectively build on Noosa National Park where the previous protections existed over land separated from it.

"The land where the developer will be able to lodge a DA, already has court approval for 24 holiday villas on one of the lots but in order to further develop this, they have had to make other land available to the State for Koala habitat...

"They have one year to lodge an application and if its successful, then the 140 hectares will transfer to the people of Queensland."

During the negotiations over the site, Mr Mantle's representatives met with officials from Mr Lucas' office to discuss the development, a spokesman for Mr Lucas confirmed yesterday.

"All contact was in accordance with the government's strict lobbyist code of conduct," he said.

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Mr Lucas did not meet with Mr Mantle or his representatives prior to a decision being made about this matter, the spokesman said.

Mr Mantle said his donation had nothing to do with the Weyba offset, but was related to supporting "good people, good policy and strong implementation".

"People who work in this (development) area would know you would be dreaming if you thought there was any connection," he said.

"That particular project took us 4½ years to get approved through a multitude of government processes."

Mr Mantle said he had donated "about the same" to both sides of politics and the donations were made from whichever company had money at the time.

"I don't chose the company, the financial controller makes the choice, it depends on which has the funds," he said.

Mr Mantle confirmed he had made a donation to the Queensland ALP through Northbrook via a sponsorship during a post budget function.

Mr Lucas also vigorously denied any connection between the donation and the offset.

"I have always made it clear I couldn't care less what political party people support," he said.

"I approve matters on their merits. It's on the public record that Godfrey Mantle also donates to the LNP and is a member of the LNP Business Roundtable."

Mr Lucas' spokesman said the offset decision was based on "expert departmental advice that this would deliver a net benefit for koala conservation in Noosaville and southeast Queensland area".

This offset will not occur unless the council gives planning approval and subject to third party appeal, said the spokesman.

Mr Mantle provided Fairfax with a copy of an electoral return showing his company, Jimmy's on the Mall, had contributed \$5500 for events advertising for the LNP's Legends of Brisbane Luncheon last year.

In previous years, Mr Mantle has made large donations to both Labor and Liberal parties through a number of his companies.

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