

# Developers on the PSU board stiff educators in favor of real estate spending spree

## Introduction

Portland State University (PSU) administrators announced they are laying off [two rounds of faculty](#) in the past year. University leaders are refusing to implement proposals from the university's [faculty senate](#) and faculty union that would ensure better working conditions for faculty and staff and better learning conditions for students. Administrators say there is not enough money in the budget to ensure just wages, respectful workloads, and racial equity in the form of equal compensation for bilingual translation. They are refusing to prioritize job protections, ensuring educators have proper staffing, can afford to live where they work, or stay at PSU for the long term.

At the same time, the University has spent [over \\$1 billion](#) on capital projects since 2010, and is continuing to spend [hundreds of millions of dollars](#) on [real estate projects](#).

Why is this? And who benefits when the University prioritizes real estate investments while faculty and staff face chronic understaffing, stagnant wages alongside historically high housing costs, and uncertainty over the future of their jobs?

One answer lies in a close examination of the outside relationships of the University's leadership. This report investigates the influence of the real estate industry at PSU. We found:

- **Real estate executives hold high-ranking positions with significant influence over the University's priorities, including spending, investments, and resource allocation.** PSU Trustee and Chair of the Finance and Administration Committee Sheryl Manning is a board observer and audit committee member for electrical construction company EC Electric. PSU Foundation Chair Al Barkouli is the CEO of real estate design and engineering firm David Evans and Associates. And PSU Foundation Trustee Herman Colas is the founder and longtime CEO of general contractor Colas Construction. This

creates a conflict of interest in which university trustees have opportunities to directly and indirectly profit from university policies that prioritize real estate speculation. It also creates an environment in which real estate executives are able to steer the University towards a pro-developer agenda that is misaligned with the needs of students and teachers.

- **Two university trustees are executives at real estate firms with which the University has done direct business.** PSU Trustee and Chair of the Finance and Administration Committee Sheryl Manning is a board observer and audit committee member for EC Electric, an electrical construction company owned by her husband. Before Manning joined the PSU board, PSU awarded EC Electric a \$6.5 million contract to work on the Fariborz Maseeh Hall capital project. PSU Foundation Trustee Herman Colas is the founder of Colas Construction, a general contracting firm. In February 2024, PSU announced they had hired Colas Construction to work on the development proposal for the PSU Portland Performing Arts and Culture Center.
- **PSU Trustee and Chair of the Finance and Administration Committee Sheryl Manning has deep ties to the Portland-area real estate industry.** In addition to holding a high-ranking position at electrical construction company EC Electric, Manning's husband is an owner in the company. He is also a powerful attorney who has worked for nearly every major real estate developer in the region. Manning is also a residential and commercial landlord who has a personal financial interest in rising housing costs and property values in Portland.
- **PSU has spent over \$1 billion on capital projects since 2010. A handful of real estate firms have profited from these projects, including some of the biggest construction firms in the world that make billions of dollars in revenue each year.** For example, PSU hired Skanska as the general contractor for the Karl Miller Center and Vernier Science Center projects, worth a combined \$142 million. Skanska is a Sweden-based, publicly traded company and one of the largest construction and development companies in the U.S. Skanska Group made \$14.8 billion in revenue in 2023.
- **Conflicts of interest at PSU extend beyond the real estate industry.** PSU Foundation Trustee Jenna Cooper runs a public relations firm called C3 Collective that appears to be currently bidding on an "on-call" contract with the University.
- **In addition to real estate, the warfare, finance, and energy industries are represented on the PSU and PSU Foundation boards.** The boards include Benjamin Berry, CEO of military drone company AirShip Technologies Group, Mark Rosenbaum, executive for Coldstream Wealth Management, an investment firm that manages money for high-net

worth individuals and university endowments, and Chris Liddle, Controller for Portland General Electric.

### **Role of PSU Board of Trustees and PSU Foundation**

This report examines real estate industry ties to two PSU entities – the PSU Board of Trustees and the PSU Foundation – that exercise control over university finances.

#### *PSU Board of Trustees: PSU's highest governing authority*

The PSU Board of Trustees is the highest governing authority at PSU. According to its [bylaws](#), the board possesses “final institutional authority” at PSU, and its policies “have precedence over other policies of the University.”

The PSU Board has numerous responsibilities, some of which [includes](#) “[e]nsuring the University’s fiscal integrity,” “overseeing the University’s financial resources and other assets,” and “preserving and protecting the University’s assets for posterity.” As part of its responsibilities, PSU board [meetings](#) review financial [reports](#) that discuss capital projects and include data on those capital projects. The PSU board [must approve](#) PSU’s annual budget.

The PSU Board of Trustees contains five different [committees](#), one of which is the Finance and Administration Committee. According to its [charter](#), the Finance and Administration Committee of the Board of Trustees is “established to oversee the integrity of the University’s financial operations, physical plant, long-term economic health and allocation of resources.”

The Finance and Administration Committee’s responsibilities [include](#) “reviewing and recommending to the Board requests and plans for capital construction and borrowing.” This committee regularly gives [reports and updates](#) at Trustee meetings that include resolutions on projects (eg, see [slide 34](#)).

#### *PSU Foundation: raising and investing private funds for PSU*

The Portland State University Foundation is responsible [for](#) “raising and managing private resources to advance PSU's priorities and mission to be a leading urban university.” The Foundation raises private money and oversees how that money is invested. According to the PSU Foundation’s most recent [financial report](#), the foundation had \$188,099,252 in total net assets at the end of June 2024.

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Both the PSU Board of Trustees and the board of the PSU Foundation have a responsibility to prioritize PSU's educational mission; however, the University's development spree in recent years and its intransigence in negotiations with university workers suggests that the boards are more concerned with real estate investment.

### **Real estate executives have influential roles on the PSU and PSU Foundation boards, leading to conflicts of interest**

University and foundation trustees Sheryl Manning, Herman Colas, and Al Barkouli are influential real estate executives in the Portland area. Manning and Barkouli hold particularly powerful positions at PSU: Manning is the Chair of the board's Finance and Administration Committee and Barkouli is the Chair of the PSU Foundation Board of Trustees. Their ties to the real estate industry give rise to a conflict of interest in which University trustees have opportunities to directly and indirectly profit from University policy that prioritizes real estate speculation at the expense of everything else.

Although the PSU board does have a [conflict of interest](#) policy, it does not require trustees to recuse themselves from decisions that present a potential conflict of interest, i.e. "an action that could affect the financial interest of the trustee, a relative of the trustee or a business with which the trustee or the relative of the trustee is associated." This creates an environment in which real estate executives are able to steer the University towards a pro-developer agenda that is often deeply misaligned with the needs of university students and teachers. Real estate executives profit from higher housing prices through increased rent and sales for their properties, while PSU teachers and students are facing historically high housing costs.

*Sheryl Manning, EC Electric*

Sheryl Manning is a powerful Portland-area Certified Public Accountant and corporate director. She began her career at [Arthur Andersen LLP](#), the disgraced accounting firm that played [a key role](#) in Enron's corporate fraud. She [joined](#) the PSU Board of Trustees in 2021 and is currently the [Chair](#) of the Finance and Administration Committee, whose responsibilities [include](#) "reviewing and recommending to the Board requests and plans for capital construction and borrowing."

Manning is also a board observer and audit committee member for EC Electric, an electrical construction company headquartered in Portland. Her husband, local attorney and [power broker](#) Steve Janik, is a [partial owner](#) of and [board member](#) at EC. PSU awarded EC Electric a

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[\\$6.5 million contract](#) to work on the Fariborz Maseeh Hall project. EC Electric highlights their work on the Fariborz Maseeh Hall project on [their website](#), but PSU does not appear to disclose the school's contract with EC anywhere in their public communications. The \$71 million Fariborz Maseeh Hall project was completed in 2019. Manning joined the PSU board two years later, in 2021. This raises questions about PSU's decision to add a real estate executive with whom they have done business to their Board of Trustees, in a role that is directly responsible for recommending plans for spending on capital projects.

Manning's husband, Steve Janik, also has close ties to the real estate industry. Now retired, he was a [longtime attorney](#) at influential law firm Dunn Carney, LP. According to one profile of Janik from the early 2000s, "Janik's client list includes a who's who of Portland's development and business community, many of whom seek either financing or crucial regulatory rulings from the city. At the same time, Janik has been hired by the city for some of its biggest development deals over the past decade, making it increasingly difficult to know whose interests he represents." Dunn Carney has [represented](#) Bora Architects, a firm that worked on both the [Vernier Science Center](#) and [PSU Portland Performing Arts and Culture Center](#) projects. It is likely they have represented other real estate firms profiting from PSU capital projects.

Manning is also a landlord. According to her 2024 [Statement of Economic Interest Form](#), she owns thirteen properties that are not her primary residence, including residential rental properties, warehouse/industrial space, and office buildings. As a landlord, Manning has a personal financial interest in rising housing costs and property values in Portland.

#### *Herman Colas, Colas Construction*

Herman Colas joined the PSU Foundation Board in [2016](#). Colas is the Founder and longtime CEO of Colas Construction, a Portland-based general contracting firm. Colas has worked on numerous projects throughout Portland, including the [Oregon Convention Center](#), the [Ground Kontrol arcade](#), and the [Rockwood Market Hall](#). In February 2024, PSU [announced](#) they had hired Colas Construction to work on their development proposal for the PSU Portland Performing Arts and Culture Center. PSU does not make completed contracts public, so we do not know how much PSU has paid Colas Construction to work on the project. But we do know that the Performing Arts and Culture Center is a massive development deal. It will reportedly cost [\\$447 million](#) and the 4.25-acre site for the project [is the largest parcel of developer land in downtown Portland](#).

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*Al Barkouli, David Evans and Associates*

Al Barkouli is the Chair of the PSU Foundation Board of Trustees. He is the Chairman and CEO of David Evans and Associates, a Portland-based [real estate design and engineering firm](#) that works on commercial, residential, and industrial real estate projects throughout the Western United States, including [in Portland](#).

### **The real estate firms profiting from PSU's capital projects**

PSU has spent over \$1 billion<sup>1</sup> on capital projects since 2010. The University has completed six major capital projects and has two projects in progress, which are summarized in the table<sup>2</sup> below.

*Portland State University Major Capital Projects, 2010-Present*

Capital Project	Cost	Real Estate firms	Completion Date
PSU Portland Performing Arts and Culture Center	Projected \$447 million	Bora Architects, Colas Construction	In progress
Art and Design/Gateway Center	\$106 million	Lever (Architect), Swinerton (General Contractor)	In progress
Vernier Science Center	\$82 million	Bora Architects (Architect), Skanska (General Contractor)	Summer 2024

<sup>1</sup> See table, "Portland State University Major Capital Projects, 2010-Present"

<sup>2</sup> Information compiled from <https://www.pdx.edu/construction/projects>

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Vanport Building	\$104 million	Andersen Construction (General Contractor), SRG Partnership (Architect)	2021
Fariborz Maseeh Hall	\$71 million	Hacker (Architect), Fortis (General Contractor), EC Electric	August 2019
Peter Stott Center/Viking Pavilion	\$51 million	Woofers Architects/Sink Combs Dethlef (Architect), Fortis (General Contractor)	April 2018
Karl Miller Center	\$60 million	SRG+Behnisch (Architects), Skanska (General Contractor)	September 2017
Robertson Life Science Building	\$200 million	SERA (Architect), JE Dunn (General Contractor)	Fall 2014

For each of these projects, the University contracts with a variety of real estate firms including general contractors, electric contractors, architects, and more. As noted above, two of these firms – EC Electric and Colas Construction – have ties to PSU board members, Sheryl Manning and Herman Colas. Other real estate firms profiting from PSU capital projects include:

- Skanska - PSU hired Skanska as the general contractor for the Karl Miller Center and Vernier Science Center projects, worth a combined \$142 million. Skanska is a Sweden-based, publicly traded company and one of the largest construction and development companies in the U.S. Skanska Group brought in [\\$14.8 billion](#) in revenue in 2023. Skanska USA CEO Richard Kennedy is the [former Vice Chair](#) of the New York Building Congress, a politically active real estate industry trade group.

- *Swinerton* - PSU hired Swinerton as the general contractor for the \$106 million Art and Design/Gateway Center project. Swinerton is a California-based construction firm with over twenty-three regional offices. In 2023, they made [\\$4.2 billion](#) in revenue.
- *Fortis Construction* - PSU hired Portland-based Fortis Construction to work on both Fariborz Maseeh Hall and Peter Stott Center/Viking Pavilion. Combined, the two projects cost over \$120 million. Fortis has worked on numerous real estate development [projects](#) throughout the Portland region, including a sports center at Reed College and an expansion of the Portland International Airport. Fortis is also a favored contractor for Meta. They have built [seven Meta data centers](#) throughout the country.

### **Warfare, finance, and energy utilities are among the other industries represented on the PSU and PSU Foundation boards**

Real estate is not the only powerful industry represented on the PSU and PSU Foundation boards. Other PSU and PSU Foundation trustees include:

- *Benjamin Berry, AirShip Technologies Group* - PSU Board Chair Benjamin Berry is the CEO of [AirShip Technologies Group](#), an Oregon based company that manufactures drones for military and commercial use. Berry has also [held](#) senior technology positions for the Royal Saudi Air Force and the Kingdom of Saudi Arabian International Airports.
- *Mark Rosenbaum, Coldstream Wealth Management* - PSU board member Mark Rosenbaum was the longtime President and CEO of Rosenbaum Financial, an investment management firm that recently merged with Coldstream Wealth Management. At Rosenbaum Financial, Rosenbaum served as wealth manager for [high net worth clients](#). Coldstream Wealth Management manages investments for individuals and businesses. They also manage investments for [university endowments](#). Rosenbaum was also Chair of the Portland Development Commission from 2003-2008. Before joining the PSU Board of Trustees, he was a member of the PSU Foundation Board of Trustees.
- *Chris Liddle, Portland General Electric* - PSU Foundation board member Chris Liddle is the Controller and Assistant Treasurer for Portland General Electric, Portland's investor-owned utility. Portland General Electric is amongst the most powerful corporations in Portland. They are ["Platinum Members"](#) of pro-business trade group Portland Metro Chamber of Commerce, along with Amazon, Google, and Wells Fargo.
- *Jenna Cooper, C3 Collective* - PSU Foundation board member Jenna Cooper is President of C3 Collective, a Portland public relations firm that represents businesses in the finance, construction, technology, healthcare, and other industries. C3 is currently listed



as a [“vendor that has expressed interest in”](#) a PSU contract for “on-call” construction related services, raising questions about conflicts of interest.

## Conclusion

The PSU and PSU Foundation Board of Trustees have a responsibility to prioritize PSU’s educational mission. PSU [says](#) it aims to be an anchor institution that supports all learners, provides equitable access to quality education, and builds a community ethos of care and wellbeing. But the University’s development spree in recent years, alongside its intransigence in negotiations with university workers, suggests that the trustees are more concerned with real estate investment.

Our investigation shows that real estate developers hold powerful positions at the University, including chairing both the Board of Trustees’ Finance Administration Committee and the PSU Foundation Board of Trustees. This creates an environment in which real estate executives are able to steer the University towards a pro-developer agenda that is misaligned with the needs of students and workers. It creates a conflict of interest in which university trustees directly and indirectly profit from university policies that encourage real estate speculation.

As PSU faculty and staff call on the University to invest in faculty, staff, and students, it remains to be seen if PSU’s leadership will prioritize real estate investment or quality education for all.

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## *About the Authors*

*This report was prepared by the Public Accountability Initiative*

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