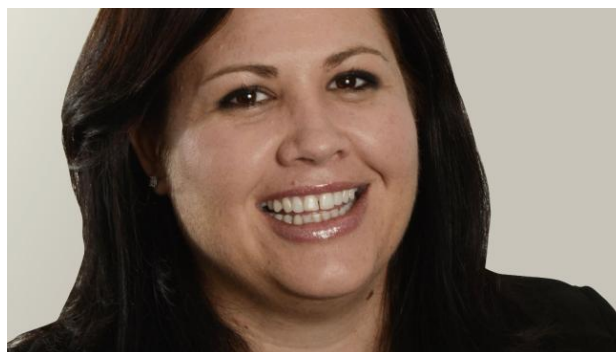


Sunland lobbyist who owed \$430,000 gave money to Stuart Robert fund



Simone Holzapfel was a former lobbyist for Gold Coast developer the Sunland Group.

MICHAEL MCKENNA, GEOFF CHAMBERS THE AUSTRALIAN 12:00AM September 30, 2016

A well-connected lobbyist gave more than \$110,000 of her “own money” to the fundraising entity of federal Liberal MP Stuart Robert as her company was being wound up with unpaid debts.

Simone Holzapfel, a former longtime adviser to Tony Abbott, owed more than \$430,000, including \$355,000 to the Australian Taxation Office, when she donated \$114,000 in 12 separate payments to Mr Robert’s “Fadden Forum” in mid-2013, ahead of the federal election.

Ms Holzapfel was then a lobbyist for Gold Coast developer Sunland Group, now at the centre of the latest controversy to embroil Mr Robert, the Gold Coast MP sacked last year from the Turnbull ministry.

Months before the donations were made, Mr Robert had defended Sunland in parliament over its involvement in the detention of two Australians in Dubai, with a speech largely lifted from briefing notes supplied by Ms Holzapfel.

The notes had been sent to both Mr Robert and Mr Abbott’s chief of staff, Peta Credlin, on the morning of the November 26, 2012, speech to parliament.

It can also be revealed that Ms Holzapfel sent the notes to Mr Robert and Ms Credlin while working as Gold Coast Mayor Tom Tate’s media officer.

She left the council in February 2013 to pursue “commercial ventures” and reboot lobbying and PR company Shac, which had been set up in 2005.

The \$114,000 donation in 2013 and Mr Robert’s bankrolling of “independent” candidates ahead of the Gold Coast council elections in March this year — as revealed by *The Australian* — are now part of an investigation by Queensland’s Crime and Corruption Commission.

Ms Holzapfel has previously told *The Australian* the donations were her “own money” and rejected suggestions she had given the money to Mr Robert’s Fadden Forum on behalf of clients.

“I donated because I wanted my former boss (Mr Abbott) to become prime minister, and that is my right to do,” she said then.

It has now been confirmed that at the time of making the donations — between July and September 2013 — Ms Holzapfel’s company was in external administration, with \$437,000 in debt.

Ms Holzapfel was the sole director of the company, Coolabird, which had changed its name from Shac months earlier and was eventually wound up.

Administrators confirmed yesterday that the company had debts of \$437,000 when it was put into liquidation, including a debt of \$355,000 to the ATO.

Ms Holzapfel set up a new company, Shac Communications, in December 2012. She did not return calls yesterday.

Mr Robert yesterday described allegations that he had supported Sunland in return for donations as “incorrect and scurrilous”.

Official declarations show the Sunland Group donated more than \$35,000 to the LNP at fundraising events and in donations between 2013 and last year. Mr Robert did not deny that Ms Holzapfel had assisted him or communicated with him about speaking in support of Sunland.

“It won’t surprise anyone to hear that a Gold Coast MP is in favour of responsible development,” he said.

“It’s what has built our city over many decades and it continues to be a driving force behind our enviable growth and prosperity.”

The former Australian Army officer said his parliamentary speech in 2012 about Sunland was in relation to “one-sided criticism” of the company.

The property developer had provided evidence against Australian businessmen Matthew Joyce and Marcus Lee, who’d been detained without trial in Dubai for almost four years.

“Following two earlier speeches delivered by a senator colleague that I also felt were one-sided, I believed that if one side of the issue could be aired in parliament, the other could be as well,” he said.

Earlier this year, revelations in *The Australian* that Mr Robert had bankrolled “independents” and that there were allegations of a secret bloc of candidates sparked investigations by Queensland’s Electoral Commission and the state’s corruption watchdog.