



June 7th, 2018

An Open Letter Re: Student Leadership at SFU

To the SFSS Board of Directors,

We'd like to begin by welcoming you to your new roles as stewards of the Simon Fraser Student Society. You are now the leaders of one of SFU's six student societies - the one with the most power and visibility, the vastest resources, and the widest reach among students. The opportunities and responsibilities that come with this position are both unique and complex, and we hope that each of you is able to access the support and encouragement you need to navigate these in a way that both serves our diverse campus community and provides you with a wonderful experience.

We are writing to you today as the Board of Directors of the Simon Fraser Public Interest Research Group (SFPIRG). SFPIRG is an independent student society, dedicated to engaging students and community in social and environmental justice. All SFU students, both undergraduate and graduate, are members of SFPIRG. Established in 1981, SFPIRG has been an integral part of the SFU community for 35+ years.

Regretfully, we have to bring some concerns to you in response to a letter that we received from the SFSS, dated April 24th, 2018, and express concerns that have come up through the process of attempting to negotiate with the SFSS for long-term space. We would also like to recognize that your first exposure to these issues may have come from an article in the June 4th issue of The Peak; we regret if this was the case, as it is missing the long historical context of what has led our organizations to the present day situation. We hope that this letter will help to contextualize the relationship and history between the SFSS and SFPIRG. We would understand if you felt a sense of defensiveness after reading the Peak article. This letter is not meant to be adversarial; rather, it is written in the spirit of honesty and accountability, and in the hopes that you will take our feedback to heart. We truly hope that you will receive it as such.

Our first concern regards the decision to deny CJSF 90.1FM, Embark, The Peak, and SFPIRG space in the Student Union Building.

As you know, the SFSS is constructing a Student Union Building (SUB). The project began in 2012 and was intended to address the student space shortage at SFU. During

the design process SFSS architects consulted with students, clubs, student unions, independent student societies, campus stakeholders, and more. As a result of this consultation process, the architects designed a building that was intended to meet the needs of all those consulted. The intention that was always conveyed during the process of seeking student approval and consultation - and the understanding shared by the University and your fellow student societies - was that the SUB would create long-term space for all of us. These plans included several organizational suites with office and lounge space, designed specifically for SFSS organizations like Out On Campus, the Women's Centre, and the First Nations Student Association, as well as independent student societies like CJSF 90.1FM, Embark, The Peak, and SFPIRG. It also followed that the SFSS would continue to provide space for Students of Caribbean & African Ancestry (SOCA), honouring the decades-long agreement and history of supporting this equity-seeking group. Because the SUB was the intended solution to the student space shortage on campus, SFU administration has long insisted that, once the SUB is constructed, the only spaces available for any of the student groups would be through the SFSS.

Right from the beginning of the SUB project, there have been multiple attempts on the parts of CJSF, Embark, the Peak and SFPIRG to clarify with the SFSS what would happen when the SUB was built. While we received many assurances that there was no need for our concern, past SFSS Boards did not feel any urgency in providing any kind of written agreement. This was perhaps an oversight, given the massive undertaking that those Board members were engaged in, but it has left all of our organizations vulnerable. We were left with no alternative but to trust that, as the campus community had been assured for several years, there would be space for us in the SUB.

We were thus relieved when, in September 2017, the SFSS asked for Expressions Of Interest from groups seeking to secure an organizational suite in the SUB. We thought that this would finally provide a timeline for all of the groups and organizations moving into the SUB, and we could start planning for the move. However, as you know, in November 2017, the SFSS committee in charge of reviewing the applications told Embark, CJSF, the Peak and SFPIRG that none of us would be allotted space in the SUB, and that the organizational suites would be converted into shared and bookable space for clubs and student unions. Six years into the SUB project, we find our organizations suddenly barred from the building.

This sudden reversal has been incredibly stressful for the students and staff who make these campus organizations function; this, plus the drawn out and painful process that has ensued since that reversal, has seriously interfered with our collective capacity to do our various work for the campus community, and has left us struggling with how best to plan for the futures of our organizations. We are also deeply puzzled by this decision, as we understood that the SUB was already planned with bookable space for clubs and student unions, and the SFSS was retaining control of other spaces that could be booked as well. We understand that clubs and student unions need space – indeed the SFPIRG lounge space and meeting room are regularly booked by student groups. We also

understand that students need services, support, mentoring, and opportunities to develop new skills in organizations that encourage them to take on leadership positions. This is what our organizations provide for students on campus. At any other university, it would be understood that having all of our organizations together in one central building would provide a rich environment for the student experience. It would also promote and enhance collaboration between different student groups. Isn't that what students need in a SUB?

Our second concern relates to the shift in the SFSS management's approach to organizational relationships, which first became apparent during our Summer 2015 sublease negotiations.

SFPIRG's previous sublease with the SFSS expired in 2011, and SFPIRG spent 4 years actively trying to engage past SFSS Boards to renegotiate the agreement. The SFSS initiated sublease negotiations with us in the summer of 2015. The negotiations that took place then marked a shift in the relationship between the SFSS and SFPIRG, as the new sublease that was presented by the SFSS was quite a departure from the former agreement. The former sublease, dating back to the early 1990's, spoke both to the leased space and to the importance of the organizational relationship that existed between the SFSS and SFPIRG. It was an acknowledgment of our shared membership, and our shared responsibility in representing the students of SFU. The new proposed sublease completely omitted any reference to the organizational relationship. Through negotiations, we tried hard to build in language that affirmed our historic and continuing organizational relationship, and also developed recommended language for an equitable and collaborative dispute resolution process. The SFSS resisted these additions and insisted on only addressing space. While we were uneasy about not formally recognizing our organizational relationship in the agreement, we continued to negotiate terms related to space.

Because the contract was legalese-heavy and more than triple the length of our former sublease, SFPIRG had no choice but to pay close attention to the details of the proposed agreement. Although not all of SFPIRG's proposals were integrated into the sublease, the SFSS and SFPIRG were able to come to agreement on a number of points through amicable and productive negotiations; however, the proposed final version of the sublease the SFSS presented to us for signing omitted several important items that we had agreed upon. When we raised concerns about these omissions and provided the agreed upon proposed language, we were met with impatience tinged with hostility by SFSS management. This was evidenced in an email sent to us inadvertently by Martin Wyant, then the new Executive Director of the SFSS, now the CEO. In response to our concerns and intending to send the email to Marc Fontaine, he stated, "I don't want to spend any more on this agreement. Why don't you ask PIRG to make the changes they wish to see and return it to us?" Curt and brusque, the dismissive nature of his email caught us by surprise, especially because we had just provided them the language to include. We had only met with Martin twice before, and our exchanges had been quite friendly and polite; it had seemed to us that he understood that collaboration and

negotiation is a process that requires active and respectful communication, back and forth. We were suddenly quite concerned that this was the new management style at the SFSS: duplicitous and divisive.

Indeed, this change marked the beginning of a new trend in which SFSS management attempts to achieve results through unilateral decision-making and a one-size-fits-all approach that ignores both the diverse needs of students and the campus community relationships that have been built over the decades, and then responds to very real concerns with frustration and disinterest. We feel strongly that these are coercive tactics that leverage a position of power in order to achieve an outcome in the interest of management's time and resources, at the expense of clear process, collective understanding, and equitable negotiations. We have been on the receiving end of these tactics on multiple issues over the last few years, including but not limited to the freezing of all disbursements from the accessibility fund, and the April 2018 extension of our sublease. We know for a fact that we are not the only group on campus facing these tactics in dealings with SFSS management. We do not feel that this is how societies that exist to serve the same diverse student body should relate to one another, and to this day we do not fully understand why the new CEO has chosen to take this stance in dealing with others.

We also have concerns about the process that has taken place with regard to the offer of “alternative spaces” for the four excluded student societies, in lieu of space in the SUB.

Having been told that our organizations would not be given space in the SUB, The Peak, CJSF and SFPIRG were offered potential spaces in the MBC: Forum Chambers, the Undergrounds, and the Peak offices. Embark was not offered any space whatsoever. The Peak agreed to stay in their current offices. CJSF remains in negotiations with the SFSS for Forum Chambers.

In response to the remaining offer of the Undergrounds, SFPIRG expressed interest in a letter dated January 5th, 2018 (Re: Response to SFSS Offer of Forum Chambers and Undergrounds); however, we also asked that the SFSS provide information about the space and the practicalities of modifying it so that it would meet the basic needs of our organization. We also outlined the circumstances that would need to exist for the Undergrounds to work for us. It should be obvious that not every space will work for every organization. For example, because SFPIRG serves a diverse student body that includes students with disabilities and we regularly have students working with us who use scooters or have other mobility issues, we needed to know if the space could be made accessible. And, if it *could* be made accessible, would the square footage remaining after the necessary accessibility modifications be large enough to actually house the permanent and student staff, and student volunteers who support our organization? Another priority for us was that all of the organizations who had been denied space in the SUB receive long-term, leased space on campus, either from the SFSS or from SFU. As we stated at the time, we did not want to be pressed into competition with other student organizations – we would rather that another group have

the space, than for SFPIRG to have it while another group was left homeless. In response to our Expression Of Interest and our description of our needs, Hangué Kim, the previous SFSS President, stated that since they could not ensure that all of the organizations would have space, they would take our letter as declining the Undergrounds. This surprised us, because we didn't see our letter as declining space; we saw our letter as raising issues that needed to be addressed.

At Hangué's request following the March 13th, 2018, meeting between the SFSS and SFPIRG Boards, and following several email exchanges on the matter, we sent another letter dated April 16th, 2018 (Re: Long-term Space Negotiations) to the SFSS in which we attempted to address the SFSS's concern about our list of needs. We clarified that the SFSS could meet our need to not be in competition for space with other student organizations by publicly supporting the other student societies in securing long-term, leased space from SFU. We were simply suggesting that the SFSS act in solidarity with the other student societies. This is something we still hope is possible. Just as the SFSS was formed via student referendum to represent the interests of the general student body, so too were CJSF, the Peak, Embark and SFPIRG. All of our organizations were formed via the same process, and all of our organizations are societies under the Societies Act. We serve the same student body, although the focuses of our different societies are different. That said, there is overlap: the SFSS and SFPIRG, for example, are both concerned with advocating for student needs in relation to fairness and inclusion; Embark and SFPIRG both do work around sustainability and protection of the environment – indeed Embark began as one of SFPIRG's Action Groups, as did the SFSS's own Out On Campus. To our minds, all of our societies exist in order to create opportunities for a diverse range of students, and it only makes sense that we are all stronger – and students are better served – if we work together and support one another in our work.

In this April 16th letter, we also asked that the SFSS Board of Directors reconsider the allocation of space in the SUB and revisit the possibility of including the excluded societies. It seems clear to us that the current SFSS plan does not actually address the lack of student space – if that were the case, we would see all of the longstanding organizations housed, along with flexible bookable space being available, which is how the SUB was designed. Instead of improving access to student space, the current plan exacerbates the problem by threatening to entirely displace several student organizations.

On April 24th, 2018, in response to our letter regarding long-term space negotiations, the SFSS sent the following letter to SFPIRG:

Dear SFPIRG Board of Directors:

In response to your letter regarding long term space, the SFSS Board of Directors has decided to withdraw the offers of space in the Maggie Benston Centre.

We wish you all the best in your future endeavors.

Sincerely,

*Hangue Kim
President*

*Jaskarn Randhawa
President Elect*

We are deeply disappointed by this letter and the refusal to acknowledge or respond to any of SFPIRG's very valid concerns.

We are also saddened to see that the current President, Jaskarn Randhawa, signed onto this letter, but we also have reason to believe that neither the current President nor the current Board (or many members of the previous Board for that matter) have had access to the full picture of what has been going on. We are concerned that a repeated misunderstanding of SFPIRG's intentions has led to the breakdown of, and the SFSS's consequent withdrawal from, long-term space negotiations.

These issues with the SUB and student space are only some of the reasons for concern with how the SFSS is functioning these days.

This letter is not short, but it nonetheless only describes a few of the reasons why it is important for each of you to take a proactive interest in learning more about what the SFSS management and some of the past Board members have been doing in the name of undergraduate student interests. Each of you should have cause for concern because the role you now fill means that you are responsible for the future of the SFSS.

Here are two more examples of why we believe each of you needs to be proactive about gathering all of the facts.

We have learned from multiple former SFSS Board members that SFSS management was never in good faith exploring the possibility of including the independent student societies in the SUB, despite public demonstrations such as broad community consultations and the Expression Of Interest process. Board members involved in SUB design committees in 2015 were told by SFSS management that if space in the SUB was ever leased to societies like CJSF or SFPIRG, the SFSS would "never get them out". It appears that SFSS management has been acting in bad faith, implying to students, to societies like SFPIRG, and indeed to the University itself, that the SFSS would provide long-term organizational space, but has never intended to follow through.

Furthermore, we are deeply concerned about the ongoing strategy being used by some at the SFSS to silence students and the organizations that serve them. We have seen the SFSS use this tactic by completely ignoring and mischaracterizing the very real and reasonable concerns SFPIRG has made public, and in demanding non-disclosure agreements in order to even have a conversation. This is a tactic of bullies and abusers –

the use of a power imbalance in a relationship to coerce the other party into keeping silent. There is a massive power imbalance between the SFSS and other student organizations because of the University's preference to only deal with the SFSS and the GSS. This power imbalance was not created by the SFSS, but it nonetheless exists. Each person involved with the SFSS needs to decide if they are comfortable exploiting that imbalance, or if they would rather try to level the playing field and build inter-organizational relationships that strengthen us all.

Sadly, for the past while, there have been some at the SFSS who are clearly content to abuse their power. The only tool we have had to try and level this power imbalance has been to speak openly and honestly about how the decisions of SFSS management and the previous Board are impacting students, student space, and student services. It appears from the SFSS's April 24th letter that we have been punished for doing this, seemingly to set an example for other students that they will also be punished if they use their voices. Instead of engaging with our concerns in any kind of way, the SFSS has ignored them and labelled SFPIRG as "difficult" and "adversarial", preferring instead to completely withdraw from any further dialogue. This is a clear example of SFSS management and SFSS representatives employing tactics of isolation, coercion, and silencing in order to exert control over other student organizations.

This is not ethical. This is not what an organization that exists to represent student interests should do.

We fear that the consolidation of authority in management that has taken place over the past few years has undermined the rightful autonomy and power of SFSS Board members, and thus has undermined your capacity to represent and advocate for students. You, not management, were elected to serve students, and it is you as Board members, not management, who have the right and the obligation to determine the course taken by the SFSS. Are strategies being developed and implemented without your input? That is not reasonable. Is information being withheld from you? That is not reasonable. As Board members, you are the employer and supervisor for all SFSS employees, including management. You are the only people with any power to ensure that they are held to high ethical standards in how they deal with students and student organizations. This power is yours, but we think there is ample evidence to indicate that the current management does not want you to know that.

We hope that the current Board, both new and returning members, will reconsider the path that the SFSS is being led down. We look forward to a future in which our organizations once again work together to serve students. We at SFPIRG are always open to speaking with any of you about the powers and responsibilities of a Board and how to support a diverse campus community through inclusive governance; if there are ways that we can support you in making your term on the Board the best it can be, we are happy to do so. It is worth noting that SFPIRG has supported past SFSS Boards by providing these same types of trainings, just as we support other student organizations and various University administrative groups and academic departments. We would be

happy to rebuild our relationship with the current SFSS Board and offer this type of training support again.

In the meantime, given the concerns we have with the SFSS's approach to maintaining organizational relationships and to responding to student voices, and with no reason to believe the SFSS will reconsider its decision about providing space to SFPIRG, SFPIRG is no longer seeking long-term space from the SFSS.

We are a part of a shared community of student organizations at SFU, and we care about fostering a community built on mutual respect and cooperation. Our experience with the preceding SFSS Board of Directors left us feeling devalued, hurt and coerced. We hold onto the hope that it will be possible for you, as the new Board of Directors and leaders of the SFSS, to mend relationships with the student groups who have been isolated and disenfranchised by the SFSS.

We are well aware that other students and student groups will continue to campaign, asking the SFSS to provide them permanent space in the SUB. We all believed in the SFSS's promised vision of a Student Union Building that would be the centre for student activity and community, and it is still possible for that dream to be realized – but it cannot happen if these student organizations and the many students who value them are pushed out. Please, listen to these students, even if they have different interests from your own. You have the power to promote an inclusive campus, to speak up, to ask hard questions, to challenge authority. We urge you to revisit the allocation of organizational space in the SUB, because you have the power to right the wrongs of your predecessors.

For the good of all SFU students, we sincerely hope that you do.

Sincerely,

The SFPIRG Board of Directors