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Councillors referred to watchdog

EXCLUSIVE

Angus Thompson

Two Sydney councillors have been referred to the state's corruption watchdog over a Chinese trip they took with a developer, whose projects they helped to push through without declaring any conflict of interest.

Former Hurstville mayor Vince

Badalati told the *Herald* that he and Liberal councillor Con Hindi had paid for their own flights and accommodation when they visited Tangshan to visit a Chinese energy and waste processing company in April 2016.

However, at a ceremony attended by Chinese media, Cr Badalati was seen onstage applauding as investor Yuqing Liu and property

developer Wensheng Liu signed an agreement for \$130 million to be injected into two proposed Hurstville apartment blocks. He also made a speech.

"It's not as if I really knew him well," Cr Badalati said of Wensheng Liu, who, according to documents filed in the NSW Supreme Court, had invited him and Cr

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Councillors referred to watchdog over China trip

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Hindi to China as part of his "investment committee".

"I just met him a couple of times and that was it," Cr Badalati said. "I was just asked to make a speech about Hurstville and the investment opportunity, basically."

Contrary to Cr Badalati's claim that he and Cr Hindi footed their accommodation bill in Tangshan, Yuqing Liu, whose company Xinfeng hosted the group, said through his lawyers that his organisation had paid for the visiting

party's accommodation.

Cr Badalati also acknowledged that a month before the trip he and Cr Hindi had been at a dinner hos-

ted by Wensheng Liu in Sydney's Chinatown, where he was photographed next to the developer and investor as an identical agreement between the pair was signed.

A week after the international trip, Crs Hindi and Badalati rejected planners' advice at a council meeting and voted in favour of adding five more storeys to Wensheng Liu's proposed 11-storey tower on Treacy St, Hurstville.

The council also accepted a modest financial offer that accompanied the amendment. The pair again made no declaration about their links to either the Lius.

The pair were then the only two of five panellists to vote for the site moderation as part of the Sydney



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East joint regional planning panel on May 4. The application was ultimately refused.

At the April 20 council meeting, they also voted to approve a planning proposal from One Capital, another of Mr Liu's companies, to change the zoning of a block on Forest Road, Hurstville, where it was signalled that a hotel, shops and apartments would be built. They voted to increase the maximum height and floorspace ratio of the development beyond what an internal report recommended.

The pair also later voted favourably on that development proposal, called the Landmark Square Precinct, during council and committee meetings under the newly formed Georges River Council, including putting forward a recommendation before the environment and planning committee in June 2018 to scrap affordable housing at

the site. This resolution had been passed in August 2017 while the council was in administration.

A spokesperson for Georges River Council said it was investigating the pair for alleged misconduct. The *Herald* also understands Crs Hindi and Badalati have been referred to the Independent Commission Against Corruption and to the NSW Office of Local Government.

Cr Hindi, who successfully appealed against a two-month suspension for misconduct in 2016, did not return calls from the *Herald*.

Both development projects have since stalled after One Capital and GR Capital went into administration last year.



Wensheng Liu (left), Yuqing Liu and Vince Badalati at a signing ceremony.