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Forterra President and CEO Michelle Connor says the nonprofit is moving forward in a “thoughtful way” after a controversy forced it to scale back.

## OUT ON A LIMB

*Forterra scales back after a string of controversies disrupted its ambitious land preservation efforts*

“I didn’t sleep. I was scared. People were hurt. There was only so much I could do to fix that.”

Michelle Connor’s voice broke as she spoke. Sitting in a Ballard coworking space on an unseasonably warm January day, the embattled nonprofit CEO had already survived calls for her job amid a string of controversies.

At its height, Forterra was a multimillion-dollar nonprofit with a staff of more than 65 employees and a national reputation for its innovative approach to preserving Pacific Northwest lands.

Forterra’s agenda expanded as it attracted big-name investors such as venture capitalists Nick Hanauer and the late Tom Alberg and garnered backing from the Russell Family Foundation, BECU and the Master Builders Association of King and Snohomish Counties.

Last decade, the mission expanded to include working with underrepresented urban and suburban communities in areas ripe for gentrification. At the urging of Alberg, Hanauer and others, the nonprofit launched a social impact vehicle called the Strong Communities Fund to promote homeownership as a means of stanching displacement in minority communities. The effort raised nearly \$29 million over two rounds.

The money was earmarked to buy and hold development sites in gentrifying areas until nonprofit community partners could raise funds to buy and develop them on their own. Returns would be modest but secondary to the mission. It ultimately succeeded with the last of the deals closing in August.

However, the scope of Forterra’s aspirations took a toll on the nonprofit and affected other groups.

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### ABOUT THIS SERIES

For decades, Forterra had garnered high-powered support for its innovative approach to land preservation before a string of controversies forced the Seattle-based nonprofit to scale back. This story is part of a yearlong reporting project on the rise and fall of Forterra.

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