

Squatters overjoyed at city purchase of Doornbach land

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Residents in Cape Town's Doornbach informal settlement, next to the Du Noon township, are overjoyed that the city has bought the land they occupied 18 years ago.

Residents of the approximately 15000-strong settlement situated adjacent to the Killarney industrial area have regularly protested over a lack of service delivery but the city has up until now been unable to provide basic services as the land was privately owned.

The sprawl of 3500 shacks is serviced only by communal water standpipes and rows of portable toilets, and the web of wires from illegal connections running from formal houses in Du Noon hang so low over the busy Potsdam Road that they sometimes snapped on passing trucks.

Previous owner of the land, Rubin Morris of Cape Killarney Investment, said the city paid him R9m for the 12ha property.

Although he said he was not happy about the price, he said there was "nothing I could do".

"You don't argue with the city, they just said 'this is it, take it or leave it'."

Morris said he lost a lot of money on the land as, had he been able to service it and divide it into industrial plots, he could have sold it for close to R60m.

Shortly before the land was invaded in 1994, it was a functioning dairy farm, said Morris. It was invaded soon after he stopped farming the land, following his father's death.

He said he fought for more than 10 years to remove the squatters, including going to the high court and then the Supreme Court of Appeal, but lost on the grounds that he could not provide alternative land for the squatters.

"I eventually gave up," he said, although as landowner he had to keep paying rates to the city.

It was a hollow victory for the squatters though, as the city could not provide services on land they did not own. But now that the way has been cleared, residents are hopeful their lives will improve.

Albert Mazula, a pastor at the Presbyterian Church, who has stayed in a two-roomed shack in the settlement for the past 13 years, sharing with his two sisters, his wife and his two young children, said he was "very happy".

He said the residents' main concern was the provision of electricity, which would minimise the occurrence of shack fires. Street lighting would help reduce crime, he said, as thieves were easily able to hide in the dark.

He said the construction of roads into the area would allow for police patrols as well as enabling access for ambulances and firefighters.

Doornbach resident Nophaseka Daniso, 36, a mother of two, who has lived in the informal

settlement for 15 years, said it meant the municipality could no longer ignore their demands for services and houses.

The city's mayoral committee member for human settlements, Ernest Sonnenberg, said "with the city being the owner of the site, it will have much greater control over service provision".

The density of the settlement was, however, extremely high, he said, which might limit or impair the proposed "in situ upgrade of the settlement".

Meanwhile, the city planned to provide basic services in the short term and incrementally improve the quality of life up to a fully upgraded formal settlement over a couple of years.

Sonnenberg said the R9m purchase price was negotiated and agreed upon between the parties.

"The city over a number of years expressed an interest in acquiring the land and engaged the landowner to this effect over an extended period of time," he said. – WCN