

Outcry over squatters with the best view in SA

New DA council frets over 'mistake' on edge of Clanwilliam Dam

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Spectacular fynbos-covered mountains, golf course views and a giant lake on your doorstep - welcome to what could be the most desirable informal settlement in South Africa.

The Cederberg municipality in the Western Cape is preparing to move more than 3000 squatters to a prime site near Clanwilliam Dam, and the owners of adjacent multimillion-rand properties are furious.

Rows of toilets made from prefabricated concrete slabs, their doors banging in the wind, mark the site on the outskirts of Clanwilliam - home of rooibos tea in the heart of the Cederberg mountains - where 640 shacks are due to be put up in coming months.

"It's embarrassing," said Cederberg district mayor Judy Mouton, whose Democratic Alliance administration inherited the project from the ANC council after local elections earlier this year. "The squatters have the prime spot: how ridiculous can one be?"

The toilets, about 300 of them, were installed two years ago at a cost of R9-million and many have been vandalised during the long delay in moving the squatters from their present site, known as Khayelitsha.

Another R1-million will be needed to fix the toilets, which have panoramic views of the craggy peaks of the Cederberg - if users leave the doors open.

Down in the nearby valley, Khayelitsha's goats roam the town's nine-hole golf course, browsing the trees and fertilising the greens.

Residents of Khayelitsha, who now live next to the town's sewerage works, are looking forward to moving their shacks to the new site with its basic services.

"It will be better there," said Zukisa Sibuta, who moved to Clanwilliam from the Eastern Cape in a search for work that has proved hard to come by. "We will have water, electricity and toilets."

But the arrival of the toilets was an unpleasant surprise to property owners a stone's throw away on the other side of the road, where several luxury estates are being developed on the shores of the dam - a bass-fishing and watersport destination for visitors from Cape Town and further afield.

More than 300 homeowners have lodged objections with the local council, saying the shacks will have a devastating effect on the value of their properties. They say the tourism potential of the dam area, and the job opportunities it could have created, has been ruined.

"I was not consulted at all," said Chris Tapsell, director of Group 3 Properties, which spent about R1-million marketing some of the luxury developments. "I've objected, but it all falls on deaf ears.

"I have e-mails from foreigners who were interested in buying, who decided they weren't going to buy because of the shacks, 20 or 30 over the last two years. It's really sad."

Tapsell said one of the main attractions of the Clanwilliam developments was the care-free, outdoor lifestyle, but the proximity of the shacks and fear of crime meant buyers would feel they had to live behind security gates and burglar bars.

Tapsell said he sympathised with Khayelitsha residents who did not have proper houses, but the decision to move them on to prime land would harm the growth of Clanwilliam.

"There are a lot of other places they could have put them that wouldn't have affected property values as they will do. It's negative for the area."

Mouton said the site could have brought in significant revenue for the municipality.

"That's almost the best spot in Clanwilliam," she said.

"I think that was a mistake. We could have generated so much more out of the land, selling the land and providing other facilities, infrastructure and so forth.

"It hasn't been done with sensitivity and the cost implication hasn't really been considered very well. But that is now something of the past. It's no use looking back, one should now look forward."

Mouton said the municipality would seek to mitigate the visual impact by building a wall and a row of more attractive brick-and-mortar "gap" houses between the road and the shacks as a kind of buffer zone.

The "gap" housing would not be occupied by the Khayelitsha squatters, but would be sold by the council to low-income families.

"We definitely are going to put up (a wall). To me, it's of the utmost importance that we must look at it from an aesthetic view point."

The previous ANC mayor of the Cederberg district, Sylvia Newman, did not return calls seeking her comment.