

When a community stands together

THE land invasion started on March 20 at 7pm. Immediately a handful of concerned community members got the ball rolling by forming the Crossmoor Crisis Committee. This is a community initiative and is apolitical.

After a community meeting held to address the land invasion, an interim steering committee was formed and executives appointed, with me tasked to engage in dialogue to move forward with addressing this issue with all pertinent role-players.

Initially we could not contact the ward councillor. A resident and a DA councillor, Tony Govender, assisted us in channeling our communication to the relevant law enforcement agencies who immediately sprung into action to curb the land invasion. After a bit of difficulty due to the demarcation process, we identified that our Ward 17 fell under the Klaarwater zone headed by ANC councillor S Khwela. He was invited to address the community and he made it abundantly clear that as the ward councillor he did not approve of shacks being erected in this ward. Meetings were set up by Khwela with all the arms of law enforcement, namely Metro, SAPS, the Land Invasion Unit and Public Order Policing to address their contribution in joining forces in handling this crisis and ironing out all grey areas. Every department was very receptive to our requests for visibility, security and handling the demolition of structures.

The deputy mayor was duly informed of what was happening on the ground and steps were put into place by the Council's security sector to handle all eventualities. We decided that we were not only going to lay our problems at the deputy mayor's door, but we were going to be part of the solution to address issues.

Due to the area not being properly maintained by the Parks department, the community embraced the teachings

The way the people of Chatsworth have rallied together against land invaders is historic and commendable, writes Omi Nair



A group of Crossmoor residents stand united on Sunday night on the vacant ground sought by land invaders.

PICTURE: KRISENDRA BISETTY

of the great Mahatma Gandhi of "Be the change you want to see". We dug into our pockets, came up with contributions and bought tools to help the community who got their hands dirty and blistered by physically cutting grass, bringing down bushes and trees to enhance visibility, both for law enforcement and for those on patrols. The dense bushes provided a safe haven where shacks were being built without being noticed and these were only discovered on entering these areas. At this point the shacks were already at an advanced stage of being built. The land invasion teams came face to face with invaders and warnings were given that the erections of dwellings were not permissible on private property belonging to eThekweni

Municipality and these structures were demolished. The laws which govern land invasion is questionable and efforts by the respective departments are in place to address these difficulties being experienced through their structures.

By day 18, 10 areas have been identified as land invasions were attempted in Crossmoor, Moorton and Shallcross. Both communities and law enforcement teams are being kept on the hop around the clock, as the invaders continue unabated with these criminal activities.

As a community we decided that we will stand together and talk with one voice, as land invasion was not going to be tolerated and we will stand off against the land invaders. The way this community has rallied together against the invaders is

commendable and this has not been done before. These are challenging times as we face off with the land invaders. The impetus to stand our ground, fight for what is ours and not letting criminals break our spirit is what gives us the motivation to take this challenge to the streets. Our message is clear – back off. This is our community and it is our concern. We will not allow our heritage and a legacy of three generations be handed over to criminals. We will stand tall; we will protect what is ours as we are doing nothing which is criminal. We are protecting our community with the safety aspect being the most important where walking to school should be a normal daily activity without the fear of being mugged. We do not want our community to

degenerate like other parts of Durban; we do not want criminal elements infiltrating our community which is a daily occurrence elsewhere; we need to maintain our property values and not be blacklisted as a high risk area by banks and insurers. We will not be soft targets for hijackers and burglars.

It is the City's responsibility to take care of its property and provide its tax paying and rates paying citizens an environment which is conducive to normal living. Our children were affected during the crucial times of exams, our breadwinners are not being productive at work as long hours spent cleaning up the area by cutting grass and patrolling the streets 24/7 is taking its toll.

Sacrifices

Some are surviving on 2-3 hours of sleep daily as they take on the added responsibility of taking care of the Council's property, which is not our role function. We have set up street patrols throughout the night to protect our property and our community. Huge sacrifices are being made by parents as they leave their children in the care of others so that they could make their contribution to fight this fight. The intimidation, taunting, threatening actions, provocation and racial comments made by the invaders cannot be dismissed. We have never been confrontational with the invaders at any time as the onus is on the community to create awareness and be visible and we leave law enforcement to carry out what their role function is.

Ladies were pelted with stones when they tried to stop the invaders from erecting their shacks. Indian people

living in the same vicinity as the invaders have been asked to support them and if they refuse, have been threatened that their lives and their homes will be in danger that so much so, most have moved in with relatives in other areas, fearing for their safety.

The ongoing stand-off between the invaders and the community cannot go on.

Ongoing negotiations with the powers-that-be continue as we try to find a solution to the well orchestrated modus operandi of criminals. As a way forward we are requesting that Council takes a stand, intervene and find solutions for what is emanating from their wards as this criminal behaviour is reaching out to the surrounds of Chatsworth.

We, as responsible law abiding citizens, need to see that Council drives forward and implement laws which govern the City and a hard-line stance adopted, for a positive outcome in curbing this issue completely.

The visibility of our patrols on the streets has cut crime down by 61% in 18 days – an awesome achievement. The support of law enforcement from Metro Police, SAPS, Public Order Policing and Security Management is nothing short of phenomenal and we salute the men and women in blue. The camaraderie of the community has reached another level where everyone has rallied together to help in whichever way – cooking and feeding the workers, patrolling the streets, liaising with the law enforcement and so much more.

Our community is our concern and we will soldier on no matter how long it takes and how much of sacrifices it takes.

We have bust the myth that Indian people are passive bystanders and we will not let this momentum wane.

Omi Nair is the chairperson of the Crossmoor Crisis Committee