

Desperate and gullible 188 believed false housing promises

ANELISA KUBHEKA

A CALL was made by one of the 188 people who were conned in a housing fraud scheme in eThekwinini to educate communities about the housing process.

The 42-year-old man, who did not want to be named for fear of victimisation as he is renting a shack in the area, claimed to have paid R220 to Zithulele Zondi, who was sentenced in the Durban Magistrate's Court this week to three years' jail for fraud.

Kiru Naidoo, spokesperson for the Human Settlements and Public Works Ministry,

said this was the first case in KwaZulu-Natal, and during MEC Ravi Pillay's tenure, that a person has been successfully prosecuted for housing fraud of this nature.

The victims, all from Bonela in Mayville, had been embroiled in a land grab in the area where municipal officials returned a number of times to demolish shacks they had illegally erected.

"He (Zondi) told us he was working with the municipality and often attended meetings. He said he had managed to persuade the city to let the community move on to this piece of land.

"He also said the city had even agreed to build us structures that were more respectable-looking than shacks," said the man.

He said Zondi, who often held meetings with the community, told them it was the ratepayers in the area who were the stumbling block preventing them from moving on to the land.

"He said that during a meeting with the municipality he was told that building shacks close to (ratepayers') homes would devalue their properties.

"In overcoming this, the city had said it would build us proper structures but we

had to pay R200 towards the building."

He explained at the time that Zondi was associating himself with the landless people's movement, Abahlali baseMjondolo, and was making them sign up.

"He had the forms and would issue membership cards. It all seemed legitimate. And when he told us we had to pay, we did not second-guess him because we were all desperate to have our own homes instead of renting," said the man.

Had the community been better informed of municipal housing procedures, they would never have fallen victim

to Zondi, he said.

Abahlali baseMjondolo's Mqapheli Bonono said the movement welcomed Zondi's sentence and hoped it would serve as a deterrent to others.

"Yes, when he (Zondi) was arrested, he was found with Abahlali documents on him and at the time we distanced ourselves from his actions. When issues started in the area, he seemed like a concerned person who came to us worried about the well-being of the community, so we gave him a chance to help set up a branch with members," said Bonono. The movement did not know what Zondi was up to.

Human Settlements and Public Works MEC Ravi Pillay welcomed the conviction. "This is a strong message to fraudsters that they will go to jail."

He said while they understood the hunger for land in the province, they would not tolerate crooks who preyed on the desperation of others.

"It is becoming increasingly clear that many land invasions are driven by syndicates or shack lords seeking personal enrichment. We call on Abahlali to condemn and take action against all within its ranks who are engaging in similar conduct," he said.



NABBED: Zithulele Zondi was sentenced to three years' imprisonment for swindling 188 people out of money, to whom he had promised housing under the false pretence that he was working in conjunction with eThekwinini Municipality.