

Land syndicate bust in sting operation

Prominent EC politician among five arrested for illegal plot sales near EL airport

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Prominent Eastern Cape politician Themba Wele has been arrested along with four others in connection with illegal sales of land near East London Airport.

Wele, a former leader of the EFF in the Eastern Cape who now champions Mmusi Maimane's One SA Movement in the province, was caught in a joint intelligence operation led by the Hawks and police on Wednesday.

Responding to Wele's arrest, One SA Movement social activist Bophelo Tladinyane, speaking on behalf of former DA leader Maimane, told the Dispatch: "It doesn't matter who it is, we just want the law to take its course."

Wele sits on the committee of the Bhongweni community near East London Airport. The other four people arrested are also committee members.

The plots they are accused of selling are on Greydell farm, which belongs to the national department of public works & infrastructure.

A police report seen by the Dispatch stated that Wele and the others were netted in "Operation Fix It".

Police crime intelligence, East

London commercial crime detectives, public works & infrastructure investigators the Hawks' asset forfeiture unit were involved in the operation.

In a statement, police spokesperson Brig Tembinkosi Kinana said: "A group was identified involved in selling posts [plots] illegally to willing illegal occupiers. According to the information, this group of suspects was identified selling plots to people. Reports suggest that the group was selling these plots for R15,000 each up to December 31 and increased to R20,000 per plot from January 2021."

The operation, which was approved by the director of public prosecutions, took place between January 20 and January 27.

The five were "arrested for fraud and additional charges of allowing/creating opportunities for illegal occupation of land might be added by the prosecutor", it says.

The investigation team recovered thousands of rands — "shared among the arrested suspects" — during the operation. Kinana said two vehicles were also seized.

The police report stated: "All the suspects were detained in East London police cells for further investigation and court appearance. The operational team was assisted by the national intervention unit and East Lon-

don visible policing to effect the arrests."

The five are due in the East London magistrate's court on Friday, Kinana added.

The property has courted controversy since January 2018, when people started to illegally build homes on the land.

In July last year hundreds of people were evicted by public works officials who demolished 70 houses, shacks and temporary structures in the operation.

However, the residents took the matter to court and won their case. The East London

high court ruled the national government should find alternative accommodation within 10 days for people whose homes were demolished while they were quarantining during level 3 of the lockdown.

On Thursday, the Dispatch spoke to one of the residents whose home had been demolished. The source, who spoke on condition of anonymity for fear of victimisation, said he bought a plot for "a substantial amount".

According to the source, committee members were charging anything from R15,000 to

R60,000 for a plot at Bhongweni and Airport Park.

He said the five were arrested after a woman went to the committee members on Tuesday to buy a site for R20,000 at Airport Park. She apparently paid R5,000 upfront and promised to return with the balance.

"I'm told that when that lady brought the balance, she asked all the committee members to be present in their meeting so she could pay all of them to avoid problems in the future. Five members pitched up and they were arrested on the spot,"

said the source.

The source said the illegal sale of plots had been happening "for years". Committee members had no other source of income so *baphila ngayo lento* [this is how they make a living], e said prices varied according to the size and location of the plot. "They are making lots of money."

He estimated some people were already millionaires because of the plot sales. "All of them have two cars, it's only a few who drive one car. Others even have taxis working in the ranks."