

Politician among five arrested for illegal land sales in East London

Mfundiso Piliso

Prominent Eastern Cape politician Themba Wele has been arrested with four others in connection with illegal sale of land near the 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, said: "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 the 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 and infrastructure.

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

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

Police spokesperson Brigadier Tembinkosi Kinana said: "A group was identified involved in selling posts [plots] illegally to 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."

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.

The investigation team recovered thousands of rands 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 London visible policing to effect the arrests."

The five were due to appear in the East London Magistrate's



THEMBA WELE

Court on today, Kinana said.

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.

Yesterday, one of the residents whose homes had been demolished, speaking on condition of anonymity for fear of victimisation, said he had 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," the source said.

The source said the illegal sale of plots had been happening for years.

The committee members had no other source of income so *baphila ngayo lento* [this is how they make a living]."

He 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." —

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