Harare: Vacant lot tax sparks outrage

Written by Chief Reporter
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HARARE -The imposition of vacant-lot tax by the City of Harare has sparked outrage from land owners.

The city is facing a critical real estate crisis and has reimposed tax on idle land lots in a bid to prevent land development groups or business conglomerates hoarding land in the hope of windfall profits. This has been a major contributor to the soaring land prices in Harare during recent years.

Well-heeled politicians and senior government officials are believed to be holding on to large quantities of land in and around the city for speculative purposes. These include the Local Government minister Ignatius Chombo. The city says the new system is in compliance with the Urban Councils Act.

The city fathers proposed that the zoning system be introduced after the previous General Valuation Roll (GVR) was declared redundant - having been renewed thrice over the past 15 years.

Harare mayor Muchadeyi Masunda says the resumption of the vacant-lot tax was not meant to dampen the housing market, but to promote better utilization of land lots and accelerate the city's economic development.

He acknowledged that it is a punitive tax, which can run up to five times the standard land price tax.

It is believed undeveloped land will attract taxes of up to $2,000 a month. The city was moving to institute enforcement rules or supplementary explanation, said Masunda.

Harare land owners, residents and developers are anxious.

"We know it's sort of a tough battle," said Patricia Munyeza, who owns undeveloped land on the outskirts of the city. She spoke to *The Zimbabwean* at the Rowan Martin Building where she had gone to lodge a complaint.

The Combined Harare Residents Association (CHRA) said the system had "many miscalculations and errors and this has raised an outcry from residents who feel that the Council is overcharging them."

In talks with the residents at Rowan Martin, one developer blasted the city's plan as "extortion".

"This is daylight robbery by the city. It's some fundraising scheme. They are trying to milk landowners to close the budget gap caused by minister Chombo's decree to reduce tariffs. We will fight them," said the angry land developer, who declined to be named.

"Many of us, and we are quite a majority, signed a petition saying no to this," said Munyeza.

Generally, however, residents hope the plan will open up space to build more houses and address root causes of vulnerability in Harare's ghettoes.
Others in settlements created under the so-called Operation Garikai at Hopley Farm -- one of Harare's largest informal settlement housing an estimated 100,000 people -- said they hoped the city would take the land and build settlements for them.

"Life in Hopley is characterized by extreme poverty, high unemployment, lack of access to basic services, and elevated HIV prevalence rates," said Mai Chido, a mother of two.

Shorai Moyo, another resident, says the area has been turned into a cash cow for organisations claiming to work in the informal settlement, but many would be hard-pressed to show a tangible contribution. She backed the plan by the Harare city council, but said the land must benefit the poor - not councillors and other well-heeled officials.

"It's unfair for people to not to develop land when we want a small pice of our own to build our own place," said school leaver and recently married Gift Ncube holding his heavily pregnant wife's hand. "It's unfair that we live in these conditions when there is so much land which is lying idle. The numbers will be increasing in this small room and we need a decent place to raise our child."