

Nothing 'secret' about land transfers in Western Cape

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IT CAME as no surprise that one of Helen Zille's first acts as premier of the Western Cape was to attack the integrity of the national housing pilot project under way in that province.

What did come as a surprise was her disingenuous characterisation of the well-publicised transfer of land parcels for the continuation of the project as "secretive" and having been effected "in bad faith", to which Business Day added the adjective "spiteful" in its editorial of May 26.

The truth is that there is nothing secret, malicious or spiteful about the N2 Gateway Project in Cape Town.

It is a national housing pilot project, launched in 2005 as one of the pilot projects for SA's new integrated human settlement policy, known as Breaking New Ground.

The N2 Gateway will deliver about 30000 homes, in the process transforming an identified set of informal settlements from slums into dignified suburbs.

By their very nature, pilot projects are expected to encounter difficulties, which should be overcome to demonstrate best practices and lessons learnt. The very best theory is worth nothing until it is successfully applied on the ground.

The era of "one-size-fits-all" RDP housing has passed and we now have to work out the optimal delivery mechanisms, which integrate people across race, space and class — including the construction of various typologies of human settlement needs over time.

Integration is a key aspect of the Breaking New Ground policy and the N2 Gateway. To understand why, one must understand a little of the Cape's unique history.

The fact that Cape Town was declared a "coloured labour preference area" throughout apartheid and Africans were sent back to their "homelands" led to rural urban migration when pass-law restrictions were lifted. But there was no accommodation to match trends of increasing urbanisation. It is estimated that 200000 families currently live in more than 200 informal settlements in Cape Town, and the majority are Africans.

An additional 200000 families in desperate need of housing in Cape Town live in appallingly overcrowded conditions in family homes, wendy houses and flimsy backyard shelters. The majority are coloured, and many have had their names on Cape Town housing waiting lists for years.

In the context of resources required to meet human settlement challenges, these Western Cape dynamics create fertile ground for racial contests, as well as contests between people living in informal settlements and backyards.

After the new national housing policy was introduced, provinces were challenged to develop proposals to pilot it. The Western Cape's proposal to transform informal settlements along the N2 Gateway was accepted for implementation by the Housing

Minmec, the committee made up of the national housing minister and all provincial housing MECs.

In order to circumvent contests among beneficiaries, a 70:30 allocations formula was devised. Seventy percent of new homes are allocated to informal settlements dwellers and 30% to so-called backyarders.

The project also tests the effectiveness of intergovernmental relations and related partnerships necessary to expedite delivery. In 2006, the national government appointed Thubelisha Homes, a state-owned company, to act as an implementation agent for the project, replacing the City of Cape Town.

The City of Cape Town, now under Democratic Alliance administration, withdrew land parcels that had been identified for the continuation of the N2 Gateway. Communities living in Barcelona, Gxagxa, Kanana, Lusaka, Qobasi, Europe and Vukuzenzele informal settlements had been told homes would be built for them in Epping, Guguletu, Wingfield, Bardale, Ottery and Blue Downs. But the project no longer had access to the land. That is at the root of Zille's outburst

Meanwhile, about 18 months ago, then-national housing minister Lindiwe Sisulu, recognising that bureaucratic constraints were hindering government capacity to deliver, began consultative processes for the establishment of the Housing Development Agency (launched this year). It has, among other things, the critical capacity to hold and manage land parcels for the development of human settlements.

In 2007, a memorandum of understanding was signed between Sisulu and the then-MEC for public works and transport in Western Cape, Marius Fransman, relating to the transfer of land parcels from the province to the national Department of Housing for the continuation of the N2 Gateway Project.

Sisulu announced the conclusion of this agreement in her address to the National Assembly on the occasion of the Department of Housing's budget vote on May 28 2007, and again made reference to these land parcels — and others, elsewhere in the country — in the budget vote last year.

The subject was picked up by various media organisations at the time, and publicised in at least one national newspaper, The Times.

Immediately after my appointment as housing MEC in the Western Cape in July last year, I made reference, in an interview with the Cape Times, to the memorandum of understanding between the province and the national department and the specific land parcels. That interview triggered a series of newspaper articles relating to one of the land parcels under discussion, in Constantia.

It was during my tenure that the new Housing Development Agency was launched, and it was announced that it would assume responsibility for the continued implementation of all "mega projects", including the N2 Gateway, Zanemvula and Khutsong. These facts were widely broadcast and published across the country.

In March this year, these facts were repeated in a live broadcast on e.tv, and in a press statement that was issued to media across the country.

It is true that following this exhaustive and very public process, final sign-off on the land deals took place just before the April election. There is nothing extraordinary about that — except to say that administrative processes required for the conclusion of land transfers were finalised then.

No single entity, no single sphere of government, will be able to eradicate the 400000 housing backlog in Cape Town on its own. This will have to be a collective effort of the government in partnership with communities and financial institutions. The N2 Gateway must be completed, and the best way we can make it succeed is for all spheres of government to work together for common objectives.

If we do not work together now to address the housing backlog, it is estimated that it will take 30 years to eradicate in Western Cape alone. We cannot afford to delay the granting of people's rights to decent shelter for another generation.

Jacobs, a former housing MEC in the Western Cape, is ANC spokesman on human settlements in the Western Cape legislature.