

Land sale: DA warns council

In a letter this week, Ngwathe's nine DA councillors warned the new municipal manager Lucky Kamolane, that an earlier council decision to sell thousands of hectares of municipal land, was seriously flawed and should be rescinded.

"Towards the end of his term your predecessor allowed council to decide to sell several thousand hectares of municipal land to Framton Mining and Investment Business Holding (Pty) Ltd," wrote caucus leader Arnold Schoonwinkel, on behalf of the caucus. "The buyer's spokesperson told council that its clients, a Chinese group, proposed to erect an iron smeltery and housing (on 997.5 ha in Parys), build and open new steel processing factories (on 1 133 ha in Heilbron) and commence farming (on 1 700 ha in Vredfort). Opposition councillors warned that the information supplied was insufficient and contradictory, and could not inform a legal decision to sell."

The letter says DA councillors welcome new investments to Ngwathe, especially when

they don't clash with existing economic activity, such as tourism, recreation, and agri-processing. But the DA objected to the buyer being allowed to buy before the Chinese investors would "commit financially" to the projects (in which they propose to invest R100 billion) "The reason for this 'selling before commitment' was not made clear to council, despite questions by councillors, and misgivings by officials" The DA says heavy pollution from a steel smeltery would be a disaster for the Vredfort Dome, a Unesco-proclaimed World Heritage Site. "No statement from a Heritage Site authority was tabled. No environmental impact study was produced."

The DA also finds it odd that the smeltery aims to process 100 million tons of iron ore per year. "The buyer stated its ore would be moved to Parys by train. No statement on existing and required rail capacity was tabled. Further, no reassurance on rail capacity was supplied, eg a statement by Transnet that it is able and willing to construct a heavy haulage rail-

way line."

The buyer claims its Parys smeltery would produce 1m tons per month, "much higher than ArcelorMittal's output (in recent years it produced under 5m tons per year at its five SA sites). New jobs to be created in Parys is claimed in one document to be 20 000, in another 30 000. It did not explain the vast difference."

The letter says Ngwathe's technical director stated that Parys and Heilbron have insufficient infrastructure (water, electrical, and sewerage) for the proposed project(s). "He did not supply a feasibility study or cost analysis for upgrading these before council made its decision. This renders the decision ill-considered." The DA complains there were also no reports from likely service suppliers such as Eskom, or Transnet, or the Department of Water Affairs. "No com-

ments were made from the Departments of Tourism, Physical Planning, Trade and Industry, the affected Free State MEC, or the Fezile Dabi District Municipality." The DA claims the decision was hurried through. "Serious questions raised by opposition councillors were repeatedly ignored. "When we pointed out that this was in breach of legal requirements, the ANC asked the speaker to stop further debate, and allow a vote forthwith. Speaker agreed, stopped debate, and the decision to sell the land was hurried through." The DA ends by saying that council's decision to sell was invalid. They ask the MM to point this out to council so that the decision can be rescinded. *Gazette* was unable to obtain comment at the time of print.