

Row over DA role in wine estate deal

Development plan approved after party's functions hosted

By **BOBBY JORDAN**

● The DA mayor of Stellenbosch approved an upmarket development on the town's oldest wine estate just weeks after the farm hosted and bankrolled two events for the political party.

The DA this week confirmed that the cost of two events at Blaauwklippen on May 27 and in early July had been "credited as a donation in kind".

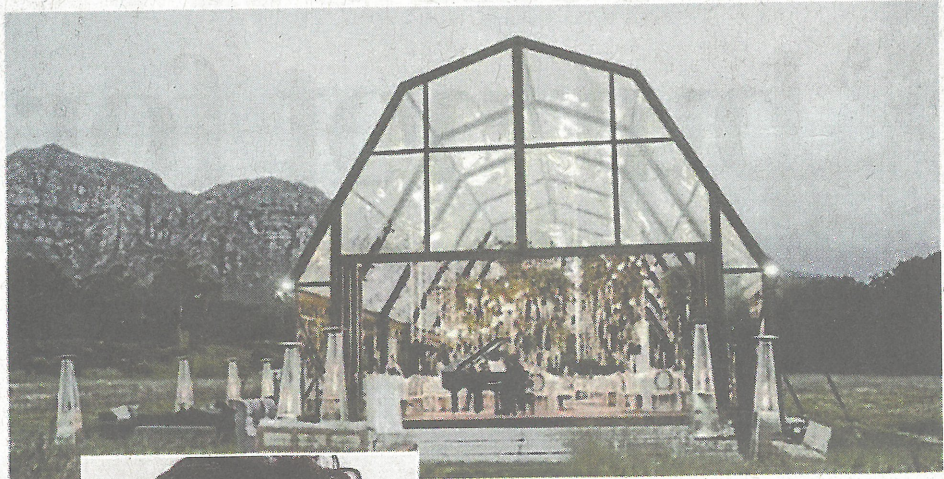
The functions – for a provincial council and a candidate selection panel – took place days after mayor Gesie van Deventer presided over an appeal hearing involving Blaauwklippen's owners.

Their planning application had been turned down by a municipal tribunal earlier in the year, but on July 13 the mayor granted the appeal in spite of opposition from the adjoining former mission station, Jamestown, where residents fear gentrification of the historic area.

The ANC said this week it would report the Blaauwklippen matter to the public protector and request a municipal inquiry into whether Van Deventer had breached the councillors' code of conduct.

The ANC's Western Cape elections head, Cameron Dugmore, said the party will also lodge a complaint with the minister of cooperative governance & traditional affairs.

"We have always argued that the DA has a very cosy relationship with certain de-



The glass cathedral at Blaauwklippen: The estate hosted two political events for the DA. Picture: blaauwklippen.com



Gesie van Deventer

velopers," said Dugmore.

"Up to now, given that there was no legislation covering declaration of donations, we have been convinced that they have continued to do special favours for certain developers, some of whom are funders of the DA."

The Stellenbosch Ratepayers Association also questioned the context of the mayor's

appeal decision. "It does raise a red flag if decisions are made following political meetings and donations," it said in a statement.

The DA and the municipality denied any wrongdoing. The party's Western Cape chair, Jaco Londt, said the DA is committed to transparency.

"There is no quid pro quo between the party and its donors," he said. "We are in an election season and have reached out to thousands of potential donors.

"We declare all donations according to the Political Party Funding Act – one of the very few parties that actually do this properly."

Londt said the donation in kind from Blaauwklippen – a waiver of commercial rates for the two functions – had been declared in accordance with the act.

"Venues are selected according to avail-

ability, convenience and suitability for our purpose. Provincial councils are rotated across regions. For the selection panel, attended by delegates from various regions, Blaauwklippen was the most convenient location."

The donation amount was not disclosed. Blaauwklippen's website advertises daily rates of about R40,000 for its main indoor venues. It is unclear how long the DA selection process lasted or what facilities were made available.

The municipality dismissed any inference of impropriety regarding the mayor's appeal decision.

"Any suggestion of partisan interference is completely unfounded and amounts to nothing more than a baseless attack," said spokesperson Stuart Grobbelaar. "We cannot provide a comment that relates to party political activities."

Van Deventer said her appeal decision was based on written submissions and oral representations. "It should be noted that the

decision was accepted by all parties concerned as none of the parties took the decision on review," she said.

"The decision letters are open to the public, in the interest of transparency, and are available from the municipal website."

Blaauwklippen CEO Ben-Carl Havemann said the proposed development of 2.4ha is not located "within the main agricultural Blaauwklippen farm" and is adjacent to a retirement village.

"The site lost its agricultural character and use through an illegal invasion, changing it to an informal settlement for more than 20 years," Havemann said.

"We are still in the planning phase of the development and will announce the timeline and the makeup of the estate when we are able to do so."

Blaauwklippen is one of SA's oldest wine farms, founded in 1682 and owned by Stellenbosch property group ATM.

Civil society groups have raised concerns about a perceived local government bias in

favour of upmarket developments at the expense of low-income housing provision and other social purposes.

Chrisben February, head of the Jamestown Heritage Committee, said the Blaauwklippen development approval disregarded strong local opposition.

"The negative effect of gentrification for the local old and long-living Jamestown families was one of the most important reasons for our appeal," February said.

Property developers, however, complain that projects worth millions of rands to the economy, and which create jobs, are too often blocked by local authorities despite the ever-growing demand for housing.

Last month the Sunday Times reported on another Stellenbosch development, Longlands, which received municipal approval despite ratepayer opposition.

The development company, Longlands Village, also appeared on a recent list of DA donors, but it denied any link between its political donations and business operations.