

Mayor fails to dispel fears about expats' homes

Anxious Brits clamour for answers during packed meeting
by Richard Torné, Costa Almeria News, 16-22 November 2007

EXPATS eager to hear positive news about the legal status of their homes at a meeting in Albox last week left dejected after the local mayor failed to give any assurances about the future of their properties.



The meeting organised by AUAN – the expat association fighting to legalise homes in the Almanzora valley - took place at the Martin Garcia Ramos School and was attended by hundreds of expats affected by the illegal building scandal.

But despite a carefully prepared presentation, which outlined in simple terms the Junta's complex land laws as well as the main obstacles to legalising expats' properties, many left feeling discouraged by what they heard.

Thousands of homes built in rural land and subsequently sold to Brits face, at worst, demolition after rogue developers sold them the properties without obtaining building permits from the council.

Large numbers of disgruntled expats abandoned the meeting before the end, dissatisfied with mayor Jose Garcia Navarro's comments and what many interpreted were little more than vague assurances about the future of their properties.

Expat Billy Wild said: "I don't think we've learnt anything. We all came here thinking they would have something new for us, but I feel we're being fobbed off as usual."

Husband James agreed: "We're just getting the same old information."

The language barrier proved to be a major obstacle as translators struggled with confusing terminology, while the request by organisers to submit written questions beforehand also prevented any form of debate.

One incident highlighted the problem between the two groups. Whereas expats were keen to have the problems outlined in simple language, officials insisted on using convoluted 'double-speak', which only made the translators' task even harder.

Quoting the Junta official who said the term 'regularise' was preferable to 'legalise' when describing the affected properties, one translator provoked howls of laughter when she explained that the properties "were not legal, but not illegal, either".

There was a similar reaction when the Junta's delegate for public works was quoted as saying that foreign EU residents should be made to feel "as welcome as in their own country".

AUAN's president, Bob Preston, remained upbeat, despite conceding that the meeting could have been planned better. He said: "We had problems with translation, but we didn't want to put our own interpretation on what was being said."

Mr Preston stressed that the association would remain committed to pressurising the Junta and the local authorities, but remarked that they were all working under a new climate of understanding.

That the meeting took place was a major break through in itself. Last year, expats were kept in the sidelines by the authorities during a symposium on urban planning, but by agreeing to appear at the AUAN meeting,

local business representatives and the mayor of Albox were tacitly admitting that they were taking notice of expats' grievances.

Mr Preston said: "We'll never be their best mates, but the important thing is that we're now cooperating with the authorities to resolve this issue as fast as possible."

The sentiments were echoed by Luis Aurelio Pérez, the president of AEPA, a local businessman's association, who was present at the meeting. He said: "The big difference is that, until now, nothing had been done to solve the situation.

"But thanks to the Junta's chief of urban planning, we will soon have an office in Albox where the sub-regional plan will help to solve part of the problem."

The mayor of Albox, Jose Garcia Navarro, also underpinned the importance of the meeting by describing the AUAN as "the association which best represents British interests in the area".

Speaking to Costa Almería News, Sr Navarro pledged to have the town plans (PGOU) ready in 10 months' time, but made it clear that it would be difficult to 'regularise' isolated homes built far away from urban centres.