

EXPATS HIT WITH NEW DEMOLITION ORDERS

Bulldozers set to pull down 19 expat homes in illegal Cantoria development

By Richard Torné

EXPATS are facing the demolition of their homes in the latest town planning scandal to hit Almería province, Costa Almería News can reveal.

Around 19 properties, all lacking building licences and first habitation certificates, are facing the bulldozers in the El Fas district of Cantoria.

Although the case has been going through the courts for almost two years residents only got to hear of the news late last month when they were served with a summons to attend the Justice of the Peace and were asked if they wanted to take part in proceedings against the accused.

The public prosecutor says the builders sold the properties to third parties despite knowing they had been built on non-urban land and without permits. He also reminded the judge that a court had ordered a halt to construction work in June 2006.

Acting on behalf of the government, he asked for the houses to be demolished and for the expat home owners to be compensated.

Expats are claiming the local mayor, Pedro Llamas García from the right-wing Partido Popular (PP) party, and the solicitors who initially represented them, repeatedly assured them that the properties were all legal.

An expat spokesman for the Cantoria Residents' Association, who wished to remain anonymous, said they had been "led up the garden path" by builders, solicitors and the council, and suggested the latest scandal could be the tip of the ice-berg.



He said: "Around 200 other properties in Cantoria are going to be in the same position. We bought in good faith and it turns out we were lied to and defrauded by everyone."

He added bitterly: "We were viewed as sheep ready to be fleeced."

At the centre of the case are two individuals accused of fraud. Defendants Karen Smit and Julio Piñeiro, who are named as the developers of the El Fas complex, have been charged with selling illegal properties. If found guilty the two could face up to two years in prison and fines of up to 22,000 euros each.

The charges are the result of an investigation in 2005 by the Guardia Civil's environment protection branch, Seprona.

Costa Almería News has had access to court documents related to the case dating as far back as 2006. Giving evidence at a preliminary hearing, Ms Smit admitted the homes in El Fas had been built without a licence.

Sr Piñeiro, also giving evidence, said he spoke to "some people at the council who verbally agreed to the construction of the homes" and that 'taxes' had been paid.

In a further twist, Ms Smit is also the partner of Daniel Poetsema, who appeared seventh in the list of candidates for the PP at the last local elections and who is allegedly behind the sale of the properties.

Controversially, Mr Poetsema signs himself as deputy mayor in all correspondence to expat residents, even though he is not a member of the ruling council.

Mr Poetsema has led an intense campaign to try to reassure the troubled expat community that "there are no illegal buildings in Cantoria", claiming the area is exempt from town planning restrictions imposed by the Junta because of a local by-law.

However, a legal source consulted over this matter dismissed Mr Poetsema's claims as "rubbish".

In another development, PP mayors and councillors from 18 municipalities, including Cantoria and Partalóa, meeting this week to discuss town planning scandals in Almería claimed they were being targeted by the socialist-led Junta for belonging to an opposition party.

In a statement released after the meeting, the PP said the Junta "only applied the law strictly if the council had a different colour to the Socialist party (PSOE)".

Neither Mr Poetsema nor Sr Llamas García were available for comment.

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Forty four years was almost too long a wait for trophy-starved Spanish fans, but their dreams of Euro cup glory finally became reality on Sunday after a deserved 1-0 win over Germany. Fans took to the streets of Almería in a frenzy of colour and noise minutes after the Spanish skipper Iker Casillas lifted the trophy in Vienna, bringing traffic to a standstill in all the towns of the province. Full report and photos on page 14 of the printed edition.

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