

HOUSE ON THE HILL

By Richard Torné, Costa Almeria News, March 6-13 2008

A MANSION belonging to a socialist councilor and a Junta employee built close to where the Priors had their home demolished last January has raised concerns among expats as to the regional government's impartiality when it comes to deciding which properties are pulled down.

Alfonso Rodriguez, who works for the Junta as harbour master in Garrucha, and his wife, Carmen Muñoz, a councillor and former mayoral candidate for the Socialist party (PSOE) in the same town, demolished an old cortijo to build a 420-square metre, two-storey mansion on Loma de Vera in early 2007.

The house, which was completed shortly before Christmas, is located just metres away from two properties belonging to expats which the Junta wants to pull down.

According to the law on the restoration of a ruin, any new structure has to be built over the 'footprint' of the original building.

Yet the mansion, which bears little resemblance to a traditional Andalucian home, was built more than 15 metres away from where the original cortijo stood. It is also far bigger in size, totalling 420 square metres.

Although by law a larger construction can be built over the site of an original ruin it is still required to comply with strict guidelines. According to Sr Rodriguez, the original cortijo was 135 square metres in size. He said the law allowed him to build a property whose ground floor dimensions could be 25 per cent greater than the original dimensions – in this case 175 square metres.

But John Bull, who is a neighbour and whose property is earmarked for demolition, said the original cortijo was far smaller. His views are supported by cadastral records, which show that the structure measured less than 80 square metres in size.

The huge house has become such a talking point among local expats that they have christened it 'the travel lodge', due to its imposing presence on the top of a hill.

The revelation will do little to reassure Loma de Vera's expat community - or indeed the thousands of Brits living in Almería who have a demolition order hanging over them - that the Junta is acting even-handedly on the matter.

Mr Bull, who stressed he was not seeking to have any house pulled down, said: "It's ridiculous that their property is the only one without a 'denuncia' by the Junta."

His wife, Christine, was more forthright: "The Junta is clearly showing favouritism."

Expat Angela Willis, who lives opposite the house belonging to Sr Rodriguez and Sra Muñoz, received the unwelcome news two weeks ago that the Junta had presented an unfavourable report about her property – the same procedure which set the wheels in motion for the demolition of the Priors' home more than four years ago. An aggrieved Mrs Willis said: "It's not sour grapes, and personally I get on well with the owners of the house, but I am angry that the mayor (Félix López) was still signing permits in October 2003 despite knowing that there were discrepancies with the Junta."

A combative Mrs Willis said she still wanted to stay. "If they accepted our taxes I'm entitled to be here," she remarked.

Although the demolition of the Priors' home in January sent shockwaves through the British media, it has gone largely unreported in the Spanish national press. Reflecting that widespread indifference, the regional



government has so far not felt the need to make a statement clarifying its position over demolitions, or whether it still intends to pull down thousands of properties in Almería.

But the revelation will prove to be embarrassing for the Junta on the eve of regional and national elections on Sunday, particularly as councillor Muñoz is a long-standing PSOE politician in Garrucha. Vera's councillor for urban planning, Paco Vázquez, expressed surprise at this newspaper's findings. He said: "The project they presented was for a restoration and they should have built over the existing area."

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