

This message was paid for by the Democratic Alliance

DA Response to misleading Plett Ratepayers Association (PRA) Reports in the CXPRESS

By Bill Nel, DA PR Councillor, Bitou/Caucus Leader

As a ratepayer, Bitou DA caucus leader and former Plett Ratepayers Association Exco member during the Small Boat Harbour debacle, I reluctantly find myself in a position where I am forced to respond on behalf of the local DA to several inaccurate, politically motivated, and misleading PRA reports and notices in the CXPRESS and elsewhere.

This response should not come as a surprise to the PRA as the Ward 2 Councillor and I discussed the concerns articulated herein directly with the PRA Exco more than a year ago. I and the Ward 2 Councillor followed this discussion up with several private discussions and correspondence directly with the former chair and, more recently, the incumbent chair.

The local DA has consistently encouraged the PRA to keep their members informed about municipal mismanagement, corruption, and irregular expenditure. The Ward 2 Councillor and I, as a matter of course, kept both the former and incumbent chairs personally informed about such issues long before the DA published or acted on any issue

The local DA has always treated the PRA Exco with the utmost respect, but we are finding it progressively more difficult to accept their bona fides and credibility. Our concern lies with their misleading and often false reporting that is tangibly designed to influence public opinion against the DA. We also have a particular concern with recent politically connected additions to the PRA Exco. Despite the PRA core principle of remaining an apolitical organization, these new Exco additions have dragged the PRA squarely into the political arena.

Although the chair signs off most of the PRA publications and newsletters, these new members pen them, never failing to dip their pen in venom where the DA is concerned. If their facts were accurate, the DA would not respond publicly but as clearly demonstrated below, they are leaving us with no choice.

It appears that the most politically-active Exco member of the PRA recently stepped down from their exco. The fact remains, however, that during his tenure on the RPA exco he repeatedly stated his burning ambition to become the next Bitou Executive Mayor. He also stated publicly that he was uniting the different concerned residents' groupings in the townships and that he had been approached to become their chairman. The upshot is that two new political parties have now been registered with the IEC namely the Bitou Concerned Residents (BCR) and the Plett Democratic Congress (PDC).

Before turning to the litany of inaccuracies and misleading reports, I need to point out that the PRA have been blatantly tailgating the DA and sensationalizing their own post facto follow-up actions, often claiming the kudos for actions initiated by the DA.

With reference to this PRA tailgating and claims over the last six months, I would prefer to invite readers to read the truth for themselves by visiting the CXPRESS 'Back Issues' at [click link to cypress and navigate to 'Back Issues'](#) to find DA publications of 1 July 2020 and 9 September 2020 which covers, among others, the budget, mayoral vehicles, scarce skills allowances, inflated management salaries, debt collection ratios, the proposed Plett University, and staff overtime to name a few.

Much of the PRA venom towards the DA is reserved for the WC MEC of Local Government, Minister Anton Bredell and even the WC Premier, Alan Winde. I cannot speak on their behalf but must caution the PRA that they are abusing the lack of understanding of the general man in the street of the complexities of the legislative framework within which the local opposition, minister and Premier must function.

Firstly, our National Constitution dictates that National, Provincial and Local Government are three independent but interdependent spheres of Government. Provincial Government only has a limited oversight responsibility over local government but does not possess the authority to dictate to Local Government what they may or may not do. Neither does Province have the authority to intervene administratively other than by formally placing Bitou under administration. I must ask Julie Carlisle who expressed her frustration in the CXPRESS about the severe municipal billing problems that we are all experiencing to please take note of this and the explanation of what is required below.

As it happens, the placement of Bitou under administration is a particularly salient example. The MEC for LG cannot place any municipality under administration without the express concurrence of the National Minister of COGTA, Nkosazana Dlamini Zuma. The local DA and Minister Bredell has done everything that is required to place Bitou under administration in terms of a stringent and very precise set of legislative rules but COGTA has thus far withheld concurrence.

Secondly, Bitou LG is as much part of “State Capture” as the rest of Government in South Africa. The local DA laid criminal charges against corrupt officials with the local SAPS in December 2017 and extensive criminal charges with the HAWKS in April 2018. The 2018 charges were backed up by an in-depth forensic investigation initiated by the Bitou DA itself. Like the charges against Jacob Zuma and his extensive list of corrupt national ministers, officials, and directors of SOE’s, nothing has happened. How on earth can we expect little Bitou to be any different?

Let it be clear that the PRA had precisely nothing to do with the initiation of any of the Forensic investigations or the laying of criminal charges against the Mayor and officials. Neither did the PRA have anything to do with the application to the WC High Court to declare the appointment of the Municipal Manager illegal. These actions were all initiated independently by the local DA and supported by the WC MEC for Local Government.

The PRA are spawning the expectation among our citizens that the local DA and even the DA WC Premier and Ministers can do more but refuse to do so. My appeal to the PRA is that they do the mature, honest, and responsible thing by studying the Constitution, the Municipal Systems and Structures Acts and then to advise our citizens in a correct and honest way.

Thirdly, the PRA need to recognise that the Bitou DA is in opposition with every limitation that functioning from the opposition bench implies. They also need to recognize that arguments against council resolutions, which are decided on a majority vote, are not recorded in the published minutes of council meetings.

A good example of inaccurate and sensationalized RPA publications can be found in the CXPRESS of 25 November 2020 (Please do read this paid for notice in full [click link to CXPress and navigate to 'Back Issues'](#)). Messrs H de Wet and B Knight can be forgiven for their unjustified criticism of the DA in their respective letters via the editor in the CXPRESS issues of 2 and 16 December. They were clearly misled by this provocative publication.

I can assure Messrs De Wet and Knight that not one cent of the R17,3 mill Covid relief budget comes from local ratepayer taxes. This special Covid relief grant comes from Central Government. Neither will one cent of this budget be spent on staff bonuses as the Plett Ratepayers claim. The

R3,6 mill they refer to is a provision earmarked for a Covid danger allowance to municipal workers. Similar allowances are being provided to all municipalities across the country. The final quantum of the danger allowance is currently under negotiation at national level between SALGA and Municipal Trade Unions.

The “R 5,992 mill on decanting of informal areas” sarcastically mentioned in this PRA notice requires explanation. “Decanting” is a commonly used term in Local Government when an area is used to move beneficiaries of RDP houses to and from an identified temporary area. As it happens this amount also comes from the Covid relief budget and will be used specifically for Qolweni which has been the cause of violent riots sparked by dire housing shortages. Furthermore, this relief budget came from Government with specific preconditions, one of which is that it must be used to relieve housing shortages during the pandemic.

To the credit of this PRA notice, several valid questions are asked but nothing that was not covered in prior DA publications long before the ratepayers deemed it fit to repeat them in a sensationalized and inaccurate form.

The PRA decision to cite DA Councillors in their personal capacity as co-respondents in their highly publicised court actions against Bitou Municipality just underlines their obvious vendetta against the DA.

Remarkably, the PRA carefully omits to mention in their AGM report that judgement was, in fact, passed in their case relating to the proposed new mayoral vehicles. In the ruling, the judge was critical of the Ratepayers standard of litigation, refusing their application for postponement and striking the matter from the court roll. The cost ruling also went against the ratepayers.

The ballot box remains the only way to ensure a clean administration in Bitou. The Bitou AUF/ANC coalition has proven to be an even greater failure than every other municipal council coalition in the history of South Africa. Coalitions always carry the seeds of their own destruction and always fail at great cost to the citizens. The fiasco in our neighbour Knysna underlines the destructive power of independents and politically active Ratepayers Associations.

The rise of independents and small parties in Bitou, backed by civic pressure groups, all have their eye on the “kingmaker” position in the 2021 LGE with the exclusive objective of gaining the mayoral seat as Peter Lobese did in 2016. Such parties will invariably start with unavoidable nepotism and overwhelming expectations of favouritism from their support base, as Lobese and others all over the country have so graphically illustrated during this term.

If ever there was a time when Bitou needed a strong and well-established party, with a clean governance track record, such as the DA has, to win an outright majority, it is in the upcoming 2021 LGE.

Whatever armchair critics and political commentators may say, statistics do not lie. In 2011, the DA could, for the first time in Bitou’s history, form a coalition government with COPE. This also proved to be a difficult coalition as it inherited a bankrupt administration from the ANC with a deficit of over R30 million. True to the history of coalitions, the DA/Cope coalition was initially lamed by internal strife and diverging objectives.

Fortunately, the DA gained the outright majority in a 2013 by-election which allowed it to fully govern Bitou for three years up to the 2016 election. In the space of these three years, Bitou, for the first time in its history, gained not only one but three successive clean audits. By the 2016 LGE, the

DA had turned the deficit around to a positive cash balance of around R76 mill which the AUF/ANC was quick to squander only to make large long-term loans to fund the budget.

In this period the DA also brought Bitou National awards for excellence in the provision of RDP housing, Blue Drop status for its potable water and Green Drop status for its recycled water. The DA also brought Bitou Blue Flag beaches which proved to be a huge tourism drawcard and re-opened the airport to allow commercial flights.

Imagine what the DA could have achieved in a second full term had it not lost the outright majority by the votes of the twenty-one voters out of the more than one thousand registered DA voters that did not cast their ballot in 2016.