

Cape Town approves rezoning of prime property for social housing in inner city

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On Tuesday, 4 September, the City of Cape Town's Municipal Planning Tribunal approved an application by the Western Cape government to consolidate and rezone the Somerset Precinct, paving the way for social housing to be built on prime property in the inner city.



Helen Bowden Nurses Home has been occupied by social housing activists since March 2017. The Western Cape government has now been given the go-ahead to develop the area for affordable housing. Photo: Ashraf Hendricks

The Somerset precinct – situated between the V&A Waterfront and the Cape Town stadium – includes Somerset Hospital, the Old City Hospital (now National Health Laboratory Service) and the Helen Bowden Nurses Home.

“This will allow a minimum of between 650 and 1,050 social housing apartments to be built on 10.94 hectares of some of the most valuable public land in the city,” said Ndifuna Ukwazi in a statement.

Reclaim the City (RTC) supported by Ndifuna Ukwazi (NU), which has been campaigning for affordable housing in the inner city, went to the tribunal with occupants of the Woodstock Hospital and the Helen Bowden Nurses Home, to support the rezoning of the Somerset Precinct. The organisations want the maximum amount of affordable housing on the site. This would be the first social housing to be built by the Western Cape government in the inner city since the end of apartheid, according to RTC.

In March 2017, after the Western Cape government chose not to build affordable housing at the Tafelberg site in Sea Point, RTC occupied the Helen Bowden property in protest.

Head of organising at NU, Nkosikhona Swaartbooi, told the tribunal: “We are the have-nots, and the developers in Cape Town are the people that have the power through money, and that has resulted in the fact that exclusive racial developments have been built in the inner city.”

Last year, the Western Cape government proposed to rezone the Somerset precinct for businesses and homes. The rezoning application committed to 300 affordable houses. RTC criticised this, saying it was too little and would account for only 4% of the precinct.

On 3 August, members of RTC met with Premier Helen Zille and according to the activists, Zille promised to ask that the rezoning application be amended to include more affordable social housing. On Tuesday, the Western Cape government submitted a new application.

“The plan is to develop over 300 affordable housing units on the Helen Bowden Nurses Home portion of the precinct. This is just the start. We are committed to maximising affordable housing on the remainder of the precinct, which has been our position from day one. This rezoning approval enables us to do that,” Zille said in a statement about Tuesday’s outcome.

RTC said the Western Cape proposed to consolidate the land into three different areas and develop them in phases with shops, offices, homes and public squares. “They have committed to build homes on 60% of the floor area and to reserve 20% (of this 60%) for social rental housing. This means that a minimum of 12% of the total floor area of the development will be social housing. They want to develop the land that has been reclaimed as Ahmed Kathrada House [Helen Bowden] first,” RTC said in a statement.

The tribunal has asked that the Western Cape government try to increase housing on the land to 80% of the floor area and that 30% of that should be for social housing, when it submits its plans.

According to NU, the freeing up of the piece of land where the Somerset Hospital is could take up to 2030 or longer.

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