

City officials in business licence probe

Bribes allegedly being paid to top staff by companies for illegal signing off on permits

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A PROBE is under way into top officials in eThekwin Municipality's business licensing unit after allegations of the illegal issuing of licences.

The Sunday Tribune has learnt that there are two separate cases of corruption being investigated by the city's ombudsman, both of them related to the issuing of business licences.

One implicates a senior official who has worked for the municipality for a lengthy period. The officials had allegedly been signing off on licences despite the applicants' failure to meet requirements.

This was allegedly done for bribes.

One such case was reported in the Sunday Tribune last week involving a plush uMhlanga eatery which had been reported to the municipality following the owner of the establishment laying an official complaint when a business licence was signed off without his permission.

The allegations come amid a crackdown by Deputy Mayor Fawzia Peer to target illegitimate businesses around the city. Peer said she had instructed members of the metro police to strengthen their focus on busi-

ness licences by doing more frequent checks, especially around prominent hotspots such as uMhlanga and Florida Road.

She said it was concerning because a large number of businesses, which served alcohol, were operating without liquor licences.

"These two categories go hand in hand.

"The proper channels need to be followed when applying for a business licence and issues such as zoning play a critical role when business licence applications are processed," said Peer.

They were also looking into restaurants which operated as nightclubs without a business licence for this, and there was cause for concern as more businesses were operating in this manner of late.

"A directive has been issued for a crackdown on such places.

"The metro police have been tasked to look into this more closely – and particularly at businesses in prime spots where it has been alleged that many of them are operating without the proper licences," said Peer.

DA councillor Heinz de Boer, who said he had raised the issue of corruption within the business licensing unit in the past, called for lifestyle audits to be conducted on all the officials within the unit

as it emerged in the past that some of them could be involved in corrupt practices.

"The issue has been raised a number of times before. Corruption within the unit has emerged in the past and it needs to be thoroughly cleaned up if we are to move in terms of making sure businesses in the city are all operating legitimately."

eThekwin spokeswoman Tozi Mthethwa said the city could not always root out corruption on its own and a joint effort was needed.

There were several joint operations conducted with other role players, based on the number of issues identified by the inspectors during their routine inspections and on complaints received.

"The sections have structured operations and those that are unstructured due to invitations by other stakeholders.

"The operations are conducted at night, where most of the contraventions are identified," said Mthethwa.

Residents were encouraged to report any suspected corruption to the City Integrity and Investigations Unit on 0800 202020 or e-mail ombuds@durban.gov.za to lay a formal complaint.

They should not be involved in corrupt practices themselves.

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