

South African urban development and agricultural needs have come to butt heads near Cape Town, as debate continues over the future of the township of Philippi. 

Cape Town city officials approved an application this past month from private developer MSP Planners to transform 280ha of agricultural land for residential purposes. The approval has sparked hot disagreement over the area's food needs versus population pressure.

The mayoral committee has argued that the agricultural value of the area has diminished and that local landowners have lost interest in farming the land.

According to website *Dailymaverick.co.za*, the Philippi Horticultural Area (PHA) produces about half of the city's carrots, cauliflower and lettuce for a total of 100,000 tons (MT) of fresh produce a year. These products are argued to be a key food source for low-income residents.

Available farming area in the zone has been on the decline for years, however. South African publication M&G reported that between 1998 and 2012, horticultural land decreased from 3,200ha to 2,370ha.

Executive Mayor Alderman Patricia de Lille dedicated her weekly newsletter to contesting development doubts, saying public debate had been distorted by misinformation.

De Lille cited a food system study requested late last year to support the push for housing development. According to the mayor, vegetables from the zone are comprised mostly of soft left lettuce destined for high-end retail shops and not for the area's poor.

"Not only was the area in question not being aggressively farmed across all plots, but the people there had indicated that they wanted to sell their land for development.

"They wanted to do so for various reasons, including increased security threats, unavoidable urban creep and the fact that of those families that were involved in farming, most of them in that particular portion wished to stop farming and move out of the area," de Lille said.

"Some of these feelings were partly motivated by the fact that low-cost housing was being planned very nearby which would sterilise the land even more than it had already been compromised by existing urban activities."

Pro-farming opponents have contested de Lille's claims.

A 2012 report called "The Role of Philippi Horticultural Area in Securing the Future of the

City" argued that the agricultural value of the land is not in fact declining and that the zone offers a significant source of low-skilled work.

The land is also complicated by its positioning over a valuable aquifer and usage by the mining industry.

"Urban development, and specifically affordable housing, carries risks associated with the high water table on the majority of the PHA as a result of mining. Apart from increased costs of development there are challenges associated with the management of storm water so as not to impact on the water (aquifer) resource," the report said.

"The City will need to consider various service and infrastructure implications should this broader urban development scenario be pursued."

Agri Wes-Cape communication's manager Porchia Adams added that despite management difficulties in the area, Philippi still fulfills an agricultural need.

"Agricultural production in the Philippi area dates back to 1885 and the area has been regarded as the vegetable basket of the Western Cape," she said.

"Although farmers are currently battling with challenges such as insufficient water and escalating crime, the land that is earmarked for housing, is still prime agricultural land."

Despite complicated pressure on the horticultural zone, Adams said food must remain a priority.

"Circumstances such as those mentioned in the previous point puts pressure on farmers in Philippi to sell their land, which is in essence acceptable.

"On the other hand, government is battling to meet transformation and land reform targets in the agricultural sector and this would be an ideal opportunity to establish black farmers on the land," she said.

"We know the Western Cape has a housing shortage, but we are uncomfortable that good agricultural land is used for housing projects. From our perspective, food security should be the 1st priority."

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