

Bitou budget opposition report

A right of reply. In an article Published on 16 June 2022 by the Knysna Plett Herald and written by Journalist Yolande Stander, there were certain allegations made by Councilor Bill Nel about how the Democratic Alliance had fought with the opposition to pass the so-called “pro-poor” budget. As the opposition we feel it is important for the public to know the truth of the matter.

The fact is that the opposition parties, being in opposition and having a duty to do so, have been holding the DA-led coalition to account for its actions and decisions in Council since November 2021 not only the last 5 weeks. We have been at every single IDP and Ward Budget meeting. We mobilised our communities to ensure that their needs were fully tabled. Councillor Nel specifically refers to the fight they had to pass their budget for the five-weeks leading up to the budget.

For the purposes of background, it is important to note that the residents of Ward 4, being the community of New Horizons, were extremely disgruntled by the contents of the budget that were being presented by the ruling coalition which includes their ward councillor Claude Terblanche. In fact, the matter got so serious that the community shut down the N2 after two of these budget meetings were they felt that the ruling coalition were ignoring their concerns. These are matters of public record but were conveniently excluded from Councillor Bill Nel's statement.

It seems the spokesperson for the ruling coalition doesn't want to admit that the difficult five-weeks which he refers to does not refer to anything done by the opposition parties in particular, but the steps and actions taken by the PDC, one of the ruling coalition parties to force the DA to improve the budget.

When the PDC approached the ANC for the second time, since the elections, to form a new coalition government the PDC were under pressure from the community it is supposed to serve to do something about the pro-rich budget. Having been through the process of negotiating a new coalition with the PDC once before, the opposition parties knew that the PDC were not being honest about their intentions. “In spite of this awareness, the opposition parties decided to “play the game” understanding that the only way to force the Democratic Alliance to present anything resembling a pro-poor budget was to entertain the approach of the PDC. The opposition parties decided to put the needs of the community of New Horizons above petty politics and chose to play along with the PDC in order to ensure that the budget is improved”, explained Councillor Sandiso Gcabayi.

It is a matter of public record that Speaker Claude Terblanche read a letter from the New Horizons Concerned Residents Forum, of which he is rumoured to be a leader, into the record at the first budget vote meeting confirming that the community were not happy with the budget. The first budget was withdrawn after questionable interference by Minister Anton Bredell when his office suddenly and vaguely requested that the budget be adjusted in line with the spatial development framework (SDF) of the municipality. Interestingly no changes were made to the budget related to these alleged SDF requirements when it was finally presented for approval and it now seems as though the office of the Minister may have been used to buy the local Democratic Alliance more time in order to secure its shaky coalition with the PDC. DA supporters will be happy to note that Councillor Terblanche of the PDC eventually read a very flowery statement pledging his approval of the budget and undying support for the DA. This is despite the fact that R3.4m was presented for the repair of the community hall on New Horizons at the IDP Budget meeting but the final budget, which Councillor Terblanche approved of contained a R1 million reduction on that sum to only R2.4m for the repairs.

“It is the role of the opposition parties to use all political strategies available to it to ensure that the ruling coalition acts in the best interests of the community. We are not interested in wasting the Municipality's time, money and resources on unnecessary Court processes when we can achieve our goals in much more sophisticated ways. It is important to note that the motion of no confidence brought by the IPM and the Patriotic Alliance did not fail, as it was simply ignored by the Speaker Cllr Claude Terblanche and has not been put before Council for a vote despite an undertaking by him given in Council to call a council meeting to vote on the matter”, said Councillor Michele Botha of the PA.

Regarding the so-called “pro-poor” budget Councillor Noksie Kolwapi of the IPM said, “We firstly welcome the fact that the DA and its coalition finally acknowledged the term 'Pro-Poor' and appear to seek to address it. Regarding the 'pro-poor' budget. The IPM Executive highlighted the fact that when you investigate the alleged “pro-poor” section of the policy you uncover the lie. The Mayor thinks that it is pro-poor to require a 50% up-front payment for a 50% discount. In most cases the unemployed

poor are in arrears by about R10'000. The Mayor clearly does not understand that being poor means that a R5000-00 down-payment is impossible and therefore prohibitive and most likely would mean that the family will not be able to buy food for 6 months if they were forced to make the payment. The poor, at best, get SASSA grants which is barely enough to pay for food and shelter. The poor are simply not in a position to accept this hollow offer. We do welcome the indigent rates being increased but we must ask why it required the Opposition to play a game of cat and mouse with the DA's coalition partners to force the DA to finally concede to this policy. Lastly we hope they will speed up the effective administrative side of it, so that people can enjoy the promised benefits of the budget. We would like to see more EPWP's placed in that department for data capturing, so that we can all be proud as citizens with an even more 'pro-poor' budget."

The long and short of it is that Councillor Bill Nel's reference to the struggle that the DA experienced for the five weeks leading to the budget vote refers to the opposition from its coalition partner, the PDC, to the budget and the strategic way in which the opposition parties were able to use this internal battle to secure a slightly better budget for the residents of New Horizons.

Regarding the rebate structure, the opposition parties are quite proud that they managed to eventually force this concession out of the DA.

The Mayor and Municipal Manager caused NOTICE NUMBER: NO: 82/2022 to be issued on 11 April 2022. The language of the notice is self explanatory and shocking.

"This serves to inform all Bitou Municipal Account holders with outstanding service and rates accounts, that your services if you have not made payment or an acceptable arrangement to pay off your outstanding debt as per due date as

indicated on your account (7 April 2022), will be disconnected/blocked effectively from 12 April 2022. This will continue until Thursday 14 April 2022. You are urged to make payments/arrangements to avoid disconnection and penalty fees."

The Patriotic Alliance immediately released a statement on its Facebook page saying the following in reasons to notice 82/2022:

"Bitou Council News

"... We call on you to have a heart for Our People. Let's give everyone a fresh start and stop this decision today.

Clear the debt, write it off. Switch everyone back on, on the condition that they recommence monthly payments. Anyone who doesn't pay after the write-off should be cut off, but let's take into account the fact that the economy was devastated and is only starting to recover now.

Please, don't do this, you will only be punishing the poor more. Heaping misery on top of misery..."

The municipality immediately backed down and didn't embark on a rampant electricity and water cutting campaign as threatened in the notice.

On 9 May 2022 the Municipality called a special budget policy meeting where the rebate structure and 50% discount policy was presented for debate and discussion. Reference to this event was shared on the Bitou Facebook page. The PA shared this message stating that a big announcement was coming soon.

It is interesting that Councillor Nel now seems to claim ownership over this rebate structure especially in light of the anti-poor notice 82/2022 and the fact that the Opposition Parties had to force the DA Mayor to soften his stance significantly from the notice issued on 11 April 2022 until now. It is fine though because the opposition are not satisfied that the policy goes far enough to alleviate the reality of the poor and forgotten people of Bitou.

It is an insult to the ideals of being pro-poor for the DA/AUF/PDC coalition to call its coalition "pro-poor". If it wasn't for the experience and skills of the opposition parties, significant parts of our communities would be without water and electricity today.

We will continue to use every political tool at our disposal to ensure that the DA Mayor and his uncertain coalition does not run roughshod over the communities we serve and we are proud and

happy that the residents of New Horizons could get some small benefit from our efforts. We strive to do more from our position of the opposition benches.