

Politics spice up restaurant lease row

20 March 2011 - 02:00

BY BOBBY JORDAN



It's the perfect place to eat - if you can stomach the politics.

The Bitou municipality has served the owners of two top beachfront restaurants in Plettenberg Bay with a notice to vacate the properties.

This clears the way for one of the eateries to be leased to an ANC mayor's husband.

Henk Visser, who has run Moby Dick's, overlooking Beacon Isle Beach, for 15 years, this week confirmed that he had been given 30 days to vacate the double-storey seafood grill.

The municipality has awarded the sought-after restaurant site to a business consortium led by Rowan Spies, husband of Knysna mayor Eleanore Bouw Spies.

"They (the council) didn't want me there. I have accepted the fact that I've lost it," said Visser. "There is obviously a political agenda. We are considered the old school."

On the other side of town, the municipality is involved in a legal battle with another of the town's prized beachfront restaurants, Lookout Deck, at the mouth of the Keurbooms River.

Chris Stroebel is taking legal action after his lease was not renewed in December. The lease was awarded to a local caterer.

Stroebel said: "We are contesting the matter because we are saying the evaluation committee did not do their job properly."

Some in the local hospitality trade are grumbling about a council that appears to be farming out restaurant tenders to pals, but other observers said it was just a case of sour grapes.

The Garden Route is one of the country's top tourist destinations. Plettenberg Bay and Knysna are both ANC-controlled councils, which will be hotly contested during the forthcoming local government elections.

Xylophone Investments was recently awarded the tender to run the 130-seater Moby Dick's.

According to records at the Companies and Intellectual Property Registrations Office, members of the close corporation include Rowan Spies and Estelle Gie, wife of local businessman Jannie Gie. Xylophone will pay the council R85500 a month in rental.

Gie defended the deal, saying: "It was a very public process. If there was a crooked deal in place, Xylophone would have been awarded the tender for much less. That is why there was a public tender, so there could be nothing (crooked)."

Rowan Spies said Xylophone had put in the highest tender and probably had the best BEE scorecard.

Democratic Alliance Bitou councillor Johann Brummer said: "With these (tenders), you have to make sure you get the best deal for the public, and we haven't done any due diligence on them (Xylophone). It seems some people are grabbing all the plums on the Garden Route."

Eleanore Bouw Spies, a popular figure in Knysna, was previously involved in tendering for another prime Garden Route restaurant, the Knysna Oyster Company. That tender was unsuccessful.

She referred queries about her husband's business affairs to Bitou municipality, which said leases at both restaurants had expired and a competitive bidding process had been set in motion.
