

Ex-Bok coach defends new plan for wine farm

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- Former Springbok rugby coach Andre Markgraaff is known for clever game plans but faces tough opposition in the Cape winelands with a bid to unbundle part of his famous wine farm Blaauwklippen.



Markgraaff is chair and shareholder of Blaauwklippen Agricultural Estates, which bought the historic 115ha farm — founded in 1682 — from the Stellenbosch municipality in 2003. The company is asking the municipality to relax title deed restrictions on two portions of the property to raise finance for upgrades. The application surfaced on a mayoral committee agenda last week but was withdrawn before it could be debated. It was also withdrawn earlier this year.

Blaauwklippen said the application to untie the properties had been pending since February 2022, when the winelands were severely affected by Covid-19 tourism woes. “Blaauwklippen submitted an application and motivation to untie two Blaauwklippen properties, which are tied to the mother erf by notarial deed, to the Stellenbosch municipality in February 2022,” the company said in response to Sunday Times queries.

“The properties being tied to the mother erf poses a commercial constraint on Blaauwklippen’s ability to raise funding to undertake new projects aimed at expanding operations, replanting vineyards, considering renewable energy initiatives and enhancing the overall brand offering to continue the substantial investments made the past few years in revitalising the Blaauwklippen brand.”

Blaauwklippen, in its submission last year, highlighted the “devastating” impact of the pandemic on the farm. It also referred to possibly selling the unbundled properties to relieve financial strain, though Markgraaff this week insisted this was not under consideration: “We won’t sell any properties — we are there for the long run. We didn’t buy it for a property development.”

Markgraaff said the move to “untie” two portions was in line with efforts to grow the farm and cement its reputation as a winelands destination: “We’ve spent a fortune on the place since we’ve bought it.”

Some townsfolk are unconvinced, saying the application could further erode the urban edge which has migrated deep into farmland due to a fast-growing population. The sentiment relates to an earlier application to rezone other Blaauwklippen-owned properties for a townhouse development — approved on appeal two years ago by mayor Gesie van Deventer after initially being turned down by the municipal planning tribunal.

At the time of the appeal decision the ANC alleged a “too cosy” relationship between Blaauwklippen and the DA-led municipality, a claim vehemently denied by the municipality. Blaauwklippen hosted a DA candidate elective conference at no charge — a “donation in kind ” — a few months before the previous municipal elections.

Blaauwklippen this week insisted its application was aimed at accessing project finance, and there were no plans to develop the farm. Markgraaff said the townhouse development, approved in 2021, was on land previously occupied by an informal settlement, and not part of a broad development plan.

On the title deed application added twice to the council agenda, council spokesperson Stuart Grobbelaar said: “More information was requested and, as such, council did not deliberate on the item or take any decision. The item will only be serving at a future council meeting after all the information has been gathered and considered. We will only be in a position to provide further information on this once the item has served before council at a future date.”

Grobbelaar dismissed insinuations of political bias: “We can’t comment on rumours and mutterings. As previously indicated, the process is completely independent of any political considerations.”

Blaauwklippen is close to the De Zalze residential golf estate and adjoins the upmarket suburb of Paradyskloof, home to several top businesspeople.

It is also close to Libertas farm, where developers plan is to build 1,000 accommodation units

Ratepayer groups have criticised recent development applications, insisting the town is under siege from upmarket estates and risks losing its agricultural soul. Developers say they are responding to market demand for housing.

Blaauwklippen’s website says: “The farm’s terroir is part of an area widely recognised as the finest wine-growing subregion in the country specifically famous for the quality of the red wines.”