

TITLE: A legacy for farm workers

(Written by Glennis Kriel)

INTRO: Owners of the South African table grape and soft citrus farm, Nieuwe Sion, is focused on giving their workers access to the mainstream economy through property ownership.

STORY: At the start of the century, when David and Elaine Potter bought the farm Nieuwe Sion near Simondium in the Western Cape of South Africa, the couple, who lives in England, resolved to create an environment that would leave their workers better off than when they started working on the farm. The 70 ha farm, producing table grapes, nectarines and soft citrus, has achieved is an active member of SIZA, the Sustainability Initiative of South Africa NPC, since it started taking part in this ethical trade assurance improvement programme.

Ethical trade, as for many other farmers in the country, however is more than a legal responsibility for the couple. Fielies du Toit, the farm's production manager explained that the Potter's vision of empowering their workers moves beyond the payment of living wages and the creation of a safe and worker friendly production environment: "The Potter's ultimate goal is to help workers and their families, especially their children, become less dependent on the farm for their financial wellbeing, by giving them access to the mainstream economy."

One way in which the Potters are trying to achieve this, is by giving their workers access to the property market. Du Toit explained that most of the labourer houses on the historic farm are old, requiring constant maintenance: "Ownership of these buildings cannot be transferred to the employees, because the houses are part of the farm. Even under ESTA law, workers only acquire permanent residence, not ownership, if they have lived on the farm for longer than ten years. Once these workers pass away, their families have to move off the farm."

To solve this, the Potters in 2015 bought 3,5 ha of land bordering their farm. They went through all the governmental loops to get the agricultural land rezoned for housing development. Environmental Impact Assessments confirmed the land was marginal, no longer suited for agricultural production, and the local municipality and Heritage Council approved the housing development, according to Du Toit. The National Department of Agriculture however, rejected the rezoning of the land with the first application.

"We are still surprised by the outcome, since the Drakenstein Municipality confirmed the land formed part of their long-term urban edge development plan. The rezoning request was submitted in April 2016 and rejected in November the same year. We have asked for the case to be reviewed, but have not yet received any new feedback," Du Toit said.

"The Department's unwillingness to grant the rezoning is disheartening, considering we actually want to assist government in supplying houses to the workers. We have experts working on this matter on our behalf and hope to have permission to subdivide soon."

Moving on

The Potters decided not to be swayed by government and went on with their R30 million housing plan in May this year. The project will supply housing to 140 souls, in the form of twenty-two two to three bedroomed houses, varying between 60 and 70 square metres, as well as eight annexed buildings with single quarters for retired workers. There will also be a crèche and aftercare facilities for the worker's children, a community centre and sport's field.

The lay-out has been architecturally designed to foster a sense of community. The community centre and crèche, for example, is situated at the bottom near the entrance of the estate. A row of houses then run up from the side of these two buildings, opening towards the sport's field, Du Toit added.

The estate will be as self-sustaining and environmentally friendly as possible. Jozua van der Merwe, financial and housing manager of the farm, said all the floors and ceilings will be insulated, while double glazed windows will be used to keep the buildings cool during the sweltering summer months and warm during the freezing winter. The houses will be furnished with solar geysers and LED lights to reduce electricity costs and the estate will have its own environmental friendly sewerage treatment plant, where water will be treated and recycled for use in the garden.

"Our workers are used to having their own gardens. The Western Cape is in the grip of a severe drought at the moment. The recycling of water will help workers to keep their water bills low and improve their water use efficiency," Van der Merwe said.

A Body corporate will be registered once the rezoning of the area is granted, that will allow employees to partake in the management in the development.

A dream come true

The workers are generally excited about the development. Katriena Blom, who tends the household flower and vegetable garden and serves on the farm's housing committee, said she heard Mr Potter talk about his visions when he bought the farm, but after a while started thinking it was mere talk. Now that excavations and building have started, she is becoming extremely excited over the prospect.

"My husband and I have worked on this farm for almost thirty years. We have always dreamt of owning our own home, but never thought it would be possible. I can only thank God for moving the Potters' hearts to do something so extraordinary for us," she said.

Sammy Frazier, an irrigation specialist who also serves on the housing committee, is elated, but also a little apprehensive about the responsibilities that will come with property ownership. "Up until now workers have stayed in farm dwellings at Nieuwe Sion for free, with the farm paying for the water, electricity and general maintenance of these houses," he explained.

The Potters are however addressing these fears. "Mr Potter has gone to great lengths to help us prepare for the transition. The social service company, Procure, for example, has been contracted to visit the farm every month and, amongst other things, give us guidance and tips on financial budgeting to prepare us for the transition," Frazier said.

He added that he was certain the Potters wanted to prevent this huge opportunity from turning into a financial burden: "The Potters assured that they would raise our wages to meet the rising costs that will come with home ownership, for example, by providing housing subsidies to employees."

Van der Merwe said that the farm was also planning on subsidising ownership in other ways: "The farm will subsidise some of the money needed by the workers to buy the properties, but will also give them credit for the number of years they have worked on the farm. By doing this, we are trying to render the houses more affordable to the workers."

While the ultimate goal is for workers to gain a tradeable asset, workers will not be permitted to sell the houses within the first five years after acquiring ownership. This is to ensure the properties generate financial growth before it is sold, Van der Merwe explained.

Since the houses are of strategic importance as farm employee dwellings, the farm will have the right of first refusal, to buy back houses at market-related prices. The plan is for independent assessors to determine the value of the land to ensure the owners get a fair market related price. “We will aim to buy all the properties that becomes available on the market, as we will need access to property for future employees,” Van der Merwe said.

For more information or interviews contact Jozua van der Merwe at jozua@nieuwsion.co.za

Issued by:

