

# Swag is in the bag

**E**ARLY LAST MONTH *The Star* reported in one of its late editions that the City of Johannesburg has admitted that 33 tracts of council-owned land, including various parks and a nature reserve – all of it prime northern suburbs real estate – were fraudulently sold within a few weeks earlier this year, and without its knowledge.

They included well-known and well-used parks such as Norscott Koppies and the Kingfisher Nature Reserve in Fourways, and Mushroom Farm and part of Ernest Ullman Park in Sandton. All had been sold for well below their market value – assuming they were for sale – and all were sold to four related companies. This astounding revelation appears to have justified only a single follow-up story, also in *The Star*, a week later. There it was reported that the Johannesburg Property Company (JPC) – the entity that deals with city-owned property – had obtained interdicts from the Johannesburg High Court to stop the transactions. According to *The Star*, Verusha Morgan, for the JPC, said in her notice of motion to the high court seeking urgent interdicts to stop the transactions, that the city had been “bombarded” by a series of fraudulent transfers of council land.

*The Star* reported that the two companies that had bought 25 such tracts of city land for R82m from a mysterious intermediary party were nevertheless contending, court interdicts notwithstanding, that they are now the rightful owners of the properties.

The deals presently under investigation were handled by Irshad Sulliman, director of Zambrotti, and Salim Bobat, director of

Zamien Investments. Both men are directors of Zunaid Moti’s property group Abalengani. Both companies are, like so many other Moti companies, registered in Cradock, in the Eastern Cape.

Moti, a former director of Zambrotti Investments 31 (Pty) Ltd and one of the financiers, told *The Star* that the interdicts were “too late”: the transfers had already been completed by the deeds office. “The fat lady has already sung,” he is reported to have declared.

Of course we are not surprised to see Mr Moti starring as the triumphant possessor of a sack of stolen swag. What does surprise us is that the story did not make national news. Things have come to a pretty pass when up to R200m-worth of public land can be stolen from the country’s biggest city by fraudsters in a single raid – and not get a mention in the national media.

What makes us think there might be more to this story than meets the eye? Well, for a start, Mr Moti’s Abalengani Group is connected by marriage and money to the Midrand Mia family, who are closely associated with the Cachalias – who include a well-known ANC politician. And then there’s the mayor of Johannesburg, the honourable Mr Masondo, with whom they are all ever-so-well acquainted.

We gather from his silence that Mr Masondo hasn’t even heard about the little problem they’re having at the Johannesburg Property Company. Or maybe it’s just that he can’t see any point in making a fuss, since the fat lady has already sung her chorus line, “The swag is in the bag”?