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Sutcliffe slated for 'sneaky' Vetch's plan

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ETHEKWINI municipal manager Michael Sutcliffe has come under fire for quietly seeking permission to lease public land for private property development at Vetch's Pier in Durban.

The plan to lease a section of the seashore and seabed on the Durban beachfront was advertised in a single-column legal notice on the back page of The Mercury yesterday, sparking criticism that the eThekwinI municipality was trying to "sneak" through controversial development plans without giving the public a proper chance to comment or object.

The legal notice by national Transport Minister Shu Ndebele states that he intends to lease the land to the eThekwinI municipal and has invited written comments or objections before May 20.

The legal notice does not provide further details, but says anyone who wants to see the full

particulars of the lease can view them during working hours at the Department of Transport's offices in Pretoria or via the office of the eThekwinI municipal manager in Durban.

When The Mercury e-mailed Sutcliffe yesterday to seek access to the documents and to ask why they were not published for all to see on the eThekwinI website, he responded: "I think it is going to council later in the week and will check."

Johnny Vassiliaros, chairman of the Durban Paddle Ski Club - which is one of several groups opposed to the development of a new hotel, yacht marina and shopping centre at Vetch's Beach - said yesterday it was "disgraceful" that Sutcliffe had ignored previous requests to reveal the purpose of a series of recent behind-the-scenes meetings between eThekwinI officials and the Durban Point Development Company.

"It must be understood that the intention of the municipality is to



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eventually hand over the seabed to the development company to build a small-craft harbour. Should this happen, access to the ocean will be restricted to members of a combined boating club and there is no doubt that the fees for this club will be exorbitant, thus restricting access to the ocean only to the elite."

The controversy over development at Vetch's Pier has been raging for several years, and final environmental approval of the project was announced by Ndebele in 2009 while he was still premier of KZN.

However, the approval process

is under review by the Durban High Court, after the Save Vetch's Association charged that there was evidence of high-level political interference to ensure the project was approved in the face of strong opposition from several citizen groups.

The association has also challenged the position of the high-water mark relied on by the developers to proceed with construction, and a dispute remains about who owns the land.

The association has written to Sutcliffe twice over the past few months requesting clarity on the municipality's plans, and an assurance that no building will start before the high court review is concluded. According to Vassiliaros, the association has not received a response.

Mpumuti Dweba, of the national Transport Department, said yesterday that she would forward a copy of the proposed Vetch's lease agreement to The Mercury this morning.