'Fake' activists targeting builders? CM seeks probe

Fadnavis asks Crime Branch to look into extortion claims after plea from two associations



Satish.Nandgaonkar
@timesgroup.com

TWEETS @satishMIRROR

Chief Minister Devendra Fadnavis has asked the Mumbai Crime Branch to inquire into claims that phoney activists and whistle-blowers are stalling real estate projects by filing frivolous cases. The directive follows an appeal by two prominent associations of builders to end the harassment, which they say is aimed at extorting money.

CREDAI-MCHI, an apex body of over 1,800 developers in the Mumbai Metropolitan Region, and Property Redevelopers' Association jointly sent the letter nearly two weeks ago, alleging a well-organised network of blackmailers were causing serious damage to the sector.

"Posing as RTI activists, these blackmailers are abusing the legal machinery to extort money from developers. With lawyers, architects and engineers on their rolls, they run relentless campaigns against our member developers and derail their projects with the objective of extracting huge amounts," the three-page letter states.

The associations claim people with a criminal record were levelling false allegations of land-use and building-code violations against builders to slow down their projects, which ultimately affects property buyers. They, however, did not name any individuals behind the alleged extortion scheme, or builders who had suffered because of bogus cases.

The letter says that fake activists approach every available forum, from municipal departments and government offices to tribunals and courts, to trigger stop-work notices or re-examination of construction approvals. While investigations drag on, they intimidate developers by threatening to pursue further action. Every delay pushes up costs.

The letter said two people developers were targeted this way, but it did not identify them. "Without any connection with the project or any locus standi, they [fake activists] are spending huge amounts to get information through RTI purely with the intention of blackmailing our members," the letter states. "This persistent approach takes a huge toll on our members, who are already under stress due to bad market conditions and high cost of finance."

The associations urged the state to initiate punitive action against people filing false complaints.

Fadnavis confirmed to Mirror that he had asked the Crime Branch to look into the concerns raised by builders. Joint police commissioner (crime) Ashutosh Dumbare was not available for comment.

CREDAI-MCHI president Nayan Shah welcomed the chief minister's directive. "In Mumbai, different types of development activities are underway. There is slum redevelopment, reconstruction of old buildings, and fresh projects. The level of compliance is high for complicated and high-profile projects as they involve various approvals. Blackmailing elements exploit this situation and throw everybody in a spin," he said.

On how one could distinguish between genuine RTI activists and fake ones, he said: "This is something the police should establish. There will be a pattern which cops will be able to identify."

Man arrested for trying to extort money from builder



The Crime Branch's anti-extortion cell on Tuesday arrested a 46-year-old man on the charge that he offered to drop complaints against a developer's project in exchange of a Rs 80-lakh bribe.

The suspect, Prashant Gudekar, allegedly took a token amount of Rs 1 lakh from Raj Pyramid Group, which is executing an SRA project in Chembur.

Gudekar, an estate agent from Govandi, started filing complaints against the project with different forums in 2015. They were rejected by authorities.

The anti-extortion cell laid a trap at a hotel after Gudekar sought another cash instalment.

—Vallabh Ozarkar