

GRAHAMSTOWN RESIDENTS' ASSOCIATION

ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING - 30TH MARCH 2004

Chairperson's Report

The past year has once again been an active one for the GRA – one that has had its challenges and demanded dedication and focus from members of our Management Committee. They have embraced their roles energetically and virtually all meetings of Municipal standing committees have been attended, ensuring constant scrutiny and essential monitoring of Council business.

We have continued to witness first hand the workings of the extended Makana Municipality and its Council, the Mayor elect and his Executive Committee, and also its commanding Municipal Manager. We have further observed the new echelon of departmental Directors take up their posts, and also engage in some now customary changing of the guards while internal 'court marshals' take place.

I believe the Grahamstown Residents Association continues to play an important role as a vigilant municipal monitoring forum, one that is committed to the civic well being of all its communities. The GRA's long time watch – dog role has by necessity in recent times demanded that it also adopt sniffer-dog and even bloodhound roles too. There is little doubt that there are some that would prefer the GRA was kept on a short leash!

In reviewing the past year I wish to briefly highlight some of the significant business that the GRA has concerned itself with during this period.

- In early 2003 the GRA was vocal in ensuring that correct procedure was followed regarding the proposed Village Green development. We were uncomfortable with the back door, and possible 'back-hand', negotiations that were taking place literally behind our backs. This also involved the issue of the illegal expropriation threat to the Bowling Club. We were pleased that this attack on one of the few remaining green belt areas in the city centre was seen off. While the GRA is certainly pro-development the caveat is clear that one needs to be most vigilant that development happens in a transparent manner, and is appropriate and sensitive to the needs of our city.
- The issue of Municipal Debt Collection, highlighted in last years AGM, remains almost permanently on our agenda. Alarming Municipal arrears have in recent months crested the R100M mark. Further factors contributing to the tenuous financial situation have been a large tariff structure hike from Eskom and also the significant 30% (29.6) increase in salary and wage

expenditure over the year, this due to an expanded municipality and new departmental directors. Essentially funding many new chiefs without enough indians to deliver on the ground.

The Auditor General reported some serious shortcomings in accounting and also noted a R6million overdraft and decline of R2.6million in investments – essentially implying that current expenditure is funded from overdraft and capital is reduced to fund day to day expenses. Further there had been no stocktaking in the past year and no property re-evaluation since 1987. Of noting is that in the region of R30million of the outstanding debt is in fact owed by Bisho, the very people who one would imagine should be setting an example to turn culture of non-payment around.

- The emotive matter regarding street name changes reared its head in a rather sinister fashion with the publishing in Grocotts Mail of proposed new street names. This was a good example of how residents rally when an issue is close to their hearts and there was wide spread public reaction. The GRA called on the Municipality to follow its declared six-step procedure tabled the previous year in this regard. We had at the time made an official submission into this process stating principles that we felt should be applied to name changing. With the potential flaunting of this agreed upon procedure the GRA wrote directly to the relevant MEC, Mr Nkwinti, foregrounding the fact that the Municipal Manager had acted outside his own council's systems and bypassed the required phase of public participation. We further highlighted the fact that any ill-considered name changing could be divisive within the community, and economically damaging to heritage and cultural tourism. At the public meeting called around this issue in June it was agreed that procedure must be followed and further that principles need to be agreed upon which will inform any name changes. The GRA again made a formal submission calling for “a process that would add value and substance to a shared heritage that could strengthen rather than polarize relationships within our diverse society”. The Hon Secretary and I also met personally with Mr Naidoo, the Municipal Manager, on the matter. We suggested the forming of a specialist committee, along the lines of the SA Geographic Names Council, which could deal objectively with the name change scenario. This has been accepted and it is reassuring that the process is presently in motion.
- The other street battle was that of the new DPS hand held parking system. This again elicited widespread response and a public meeting. While the GRA had cautioned residents about the potential changes many felt again that there had not been sufficient public participation. Consideration of the economic impact on the CBD and the socio-economic effect on existing car guards had not been addressed. Again this matter highlighted the necessity to be vigilant regarding council decision-making and potential long-term implications thereof (and there is a 5 year contract with DPS). It also brought to the fore the very pressing need for a Grahamstown Chamber of Commerce or other body representative of the business community who could address such issues. A task team was established at the public meeting, which had some success in negotiations with DPS, but the matter is still far from resolved and the CBD

definitely appears more vacant than life before DPS! Increases in tariffs to R3.00 an hour and extended metering areas are imminent. Aluta Continua!

- Still out on the streets ... the fiasco concerning the closure of the toilets in the City Hall to the public and lack of provision of any alternative in the CBD 'caused a stink'. This matter has still not been resolved despite a survey conducted by the City Engineers Department looking at possible alternative sites and budgetary allocation having been made. The fact that rate paying residents and visitors do not have access to public toilets is clearly totally unacceptable – there is an obvious health hazard, damage to monuments and property results and this is surely a minimum requirement for attracting tourists. We keep our fingers, and legs crossed, that this matter will be resolved soon.
- With a constant eye on the running of the 'municipal machine' we have continued to acquaint ourselves with the procedures of the new Municipal Systems and Structures Act. The GRA has on a number of occasions during the past year held the Makana Municipality accountable to this legislation, requiring the publication of remuneration packages, quarterly reports etc.

One of the requirements of this legislation is the establishment of an Audit Committee to review the municipality's performance management and financial systems. While it is reassuring to note that we have our secretary, Prof Roux van der Merwe, aboard as one of three independent experts on this audit committee it is of concern that it has as yet to convene, despite having been in place for a year. This is a matter we will pursue, as it would be nice to know that those in public office are honoring their performance contracts while earning their healthy remuneration packages!

Still with an eye on the workings of the municipality it has been of concern that the Mayor has seen fit to approve payment of Business Class travel, hotel and other expenses not only for himself, as advised by the SALGA Handbook, but also for the Municipal manager, Speaker, members of the Mayoral Executive, and Directors. This is despite a contrary recommendation from the Corporate Services committee and without reasons given. It is of grave concern that this apparent flouting of portfolio decisions in favour of mayoral autocracy flies in the face of our entrenched democracy. There is presently a lack of effective 'checks and balances' regarding the functioning of decision making and recommendations made by Portfolio Committees. It is felt that these Council procedures need to be brought in line with those of other transparent municipalities like Buffalo City.

- The GRA has kept a watching brief on the Grahamstown East Stockowners Association and problems encountered with large numbers of stock in the residential areas and on public roads. Demands from stockowners for more commonage have resulted in the purchase of four additional farms, which are intended to get the livestock out of the townships. Despite 2 ½ years research informing recommendations in terms of stock fees for grazing, land allocation, fencing of camps, stock registration etc the Mayor vetoed the proposals and

has settled on a nominal R10 a month unlimited grazing fee. The possibility of poor land management and squatting clearly exists if effective management is not ensured. The Albany Soil Conservation Committee has been re-established and it is hoped that they, along possibly with LEAP (Local Environmental Action Plan – a Rhodes/Makana partnership), may be able to be of some assistance in this regard. Also of note is that is that drought relief funds are also being sought by the stockowners – further large scale subsidization of a relatively small portion of the community.

- Still on land matters the Alicedale/Shamwari PPP development was good news for Makana and should have positive spin-offs for the town. This has been extensively reported on in the press and appears to be progressing well. Some concern though has been expressed about ‘fast tracking procedures’ that may have by-passed environmental impact legislation.
- The GRA has continued to monitor the housing developments in Grahamstown East and has expressed concern with the slow delivery in some areas and poor build quality. Many contractors are unregistered and employ unskilled labour resulting in sub-standard structures that do not conform to National Housing Codes. Money also does not exist to repair sub-standard houses and the Municipality appears to have painted itself into a tight corner with the developments that it is self-managing. The long-term implications are worrying both for potential homeowners and ratepayers.
- ‘Issues Aesthetic’ continue to remain in the eye! Finally after efforts by the GRA and committee members over a number of years to have the Aesthetics Committee reviewed Council has now stated publicly that it will look at the issue. I am also in receipt of a recommendation to Council that it will in future fall under the LHID standing Committee (Land, Housing and Infrastructure Development). This is hopefully good news, as it will finally have a home base and official recognition as a sub-committee. It needs noting that the committee is made up of volunteers and is chaired by a Councilor. The Municipality has in the past drawn up agendas if and when it feels there is business and with the assistance of the presiding chair. There has been a feeling for some time now that the committee is dysfunctional, it has met erratically, needs a new vision and mandate, and also appears to have an uncommitted chairperson. Questions have also been asked as to the political will of public officers to enforce the by-laws that clearly protects our valuable cultural heritage and its related economy. We only need to look at scenarios that have been around for a few years like garish Fruit and Veg City that Council took an official resolution on to pursue legally to rectify and has not been followed through, or the ‘bombed out’ fire damaged Haytons Building that contravenes SAHRA historic building regulations to realize that there is a lack of commitment to preservation and aesthetics.

It has been said before that Grahamstown cannot afford to have its intrinsic potential for cultural tourism devalued due to a slide in the towns aesthetics – the economic ramifications could be disastrous. I am sure Prof Hugo Nel will elaborate further on this issue.

- There are numerous other issues that the GRA has focused on that I could elaborate on time permitting. We are though fortunate to have a regular monthly feature in Grocotts Mail, titled 'This Month in Council', which covers most GRA matters. I am most thankful to Roux van der Merwe, our Honary Secretary, for so dutifully and eloquently penning these features and giving us a public voice. Also for energetically covering the rest of the associations secretariat duties – no small feat!

I wish also to thank the rest of the GRA Management Committee who have diligently covered their relevant portfolios over the past year. Your time and commitment are much appreciated.

We have already bid farewell to our Honorary Treasurer Prof Wesley Kotze who has retired to Cape Town. It is with regret that I need also to bid farewell to Prof Brian Gaybba from our Management Committee – a past Chairman for a number of years and stalwart GRA member you will be missed. I hope to be able to tap your wisdom on certain matters when the need arises. Many thanks for your many years of service.

As Chairperson of the Grahamstown Residents Association I wish to express our continuing commitment to playing a constructive and meaningful role in monitoring the municipal and civic affairs of Grahamstown, to persist in our efforts to be representative of the demographics of the city, and address issues relating to all its communities.

Finally I would like to appeal to you to come forward and nominate new members for office and also importantly to renew your membership.

Thank you.

Prof DOMINIC THORBURN
GRA Chairperson
30 March 2004