

GRAHAMSTOWN RESIDENTS' ASSOCIATION

ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING – 28th MARCH 2006

Chairperson's Report

The past year has unquestionably once again been an active one for the GRA – one that has required dedication and commitment from members of our Management Committee. Our loyal squad has embraced their portfolios tirelessly and once more virtually all meetings of Municipal standing committees and Council Meetings have been attended, ensuring regular scrutiny and crucial monitoring of Council affairs and systems. I wish to sincerely thank them for this committed interest and dedication.

It is my ongoing belief that the Grahamstown Residents Association continues to play an essential role as a vigilant non-political municipal accountability monitor - a dynamic forum that attempts to keep its finger on the proverbial pulse, however weak or hard to find at times, and a pulse that indicates the civic well being of all our communities.

In reviewing the past year I wish to briefly highlight just a few of the more noteworthy matters that the Association has engaged with during this period.

- *Administration Woes* – The Makana Municipality continues to suffer from some serious problems in day to day administration – this despite the Presidents “new demands for effective and efficient systems of local government”. The GRA encounters this dysfunction on a practical level with the erratic and at times chaotic scheduling and cancellation of meetings, absent officials and directors (often of their own portfolio meetings), agenda items that disappear, and Councilor submissions that simply evaporate. This lack of control and direction certainly starts at the top and here the buck must stop at the Municipal Manger's door! The MM has earned a reputation for being consistently absent from meetings where his presence and input are required as the Chief Executive and Accounting officer. Even a memo from the National Treasury advising Municipal Managers and Mayors to attend workshops on the Municipal Finance Management Act seemed to fall on deaf ears. Finally when discussions eventually happen most often clear decisions are not taken, and there is little concise and swift feedback via minutes. When recommendations do reach the Executive Mayoral Committee they are either overridden or fall off the radar screen. Clearly there cannot be effective and healthy service delivery if the delivery and function of basic administration does not happen.
- *Matters Technical* Following close on the heels of administrative woes of Makana Municipality must surely be anguish regarding matters technical. The Technical Services Division limps along suffering from not only being limbless but literally also lacking a head. Presently without a director it has also seen, like other divisions, a virtual complete exodus of experience and expertise – people

like Koos Schoombee, Terry Horner, Charl Malan and Billy Krige have all gone to seek greener pastures in other ventures. These losses, coupled with the departure of the former Town Clerk Steve Cridland, and what Roux van der Merwe refers to as 'Corporate Memory', impacts very negatively especially on functioning within this division. With no apparent damage control on the horizon, other than engaging Setplan Consultants at considerable expense, there is little to put resident's minds at rest.

This lack of human resources is coupled with aging infrastructure and lack of critical capital expenditure and reinvestment of equipment, preventative maintenance and servicing. On a basic level this plays itself out with things like service vehicles that will not start (due to lights being left on probably purposefully) or are mechanically unfit for service resulting in dysfunction like refuse not being collected.

It is thus little wonder then that in May last year Grahamstown joined other larger metropolises in darkness when the lights literally went out with an electrifying bang. The meltdown of our major sub-station, due to the neglect of basic preventative maintenance, has reportedly cost the city in the region of R10 million. What was again noticeable after the bang was the deafening silence from the town's CEO – the Municipal Manager! Further resultant fall-out from this debacle was that the recently appointed Deputy Director and electrical expert, Mr Mokgotsi, appears to have succumbed to Eskom stage fright and also resigned. It is no coincidence that the local supermarkets are now running specials on portable camping gas lights and cookers. The only light at the end of the tunnel at this stage is probably Municipal manager stumbling around with a candle, looking for a qualified electrical engineer. In the meantime again the expertise is sought from consultant electricians at great expense to the ratepayer.

On a similar tack there have been failures with the city's key water pumps that facilitate pumping from Settlers Dam – again these are old and very expensive to replace. Despite at least half a million Rand having been spent on them they appear to still be a problem and will inevitably require capital expenditure and replacement if we are not to be left not only in the dark but thirsty as well! Lucky at least there is the Gariiep Dam in the meantime.

- Again *Financial Matters and Budget* have remained high on the agenda. Municipal debt remains unacceptably high at over R114 million. A process of 'data cleansing' has though been engaged with to look at unrecoverable debt and write it off – it is though amazing that debtors have been allowed over recent years to accumulate to this degree – many from well healed Grahamstown Western areas.

Mr Dredge reports surplus of income over expenditure, with income in excess of R4.5 million over budget. Regrettably none of the surplus has gone to address shortfall in the necessary capital expenditure mentioned earlier. In fact much budgeted for and available money has not been spent where it should have – for example only a fraction of the R350 000 budgeted for roads has been spend and similarly for Health Care, overspending on line items though was rife. No reasons are given for this lack of delivery and it is little wonder that residents from some

communities have been protesting, especially with additional irregular and unbudgeted for expenditure by municipal officials and a phone bill of over R1 Million!

On a positive note the Makana Municipality can still boast the only functioning Independent Auditing Committee among the 9 local Cacadu municipalities. This is due in no small way to the dedicated input from the committee members. At least there is accountability in this regard and Makana appears to have also kept its hands relatively clean of the temptation of corruption, unlike some other struggling authorities. In addition to this independent audit body the municipality is required by the Municipal Structures Act to have an internal audit – this has now been outsourced to Price, Waterhouse, & Coopers which should bode well for better internal fiscal management. Certainly the Auditor General has noted certain lack of management of conference expenditure, financial discipline and reporting systems.

It is though worrying that the present 2006/7 budget deadline that required a tight monthly programs from last August was not adhered to. No targets were met with few if any report responses from the required directorates. There is clearly a worrying lack of expertise and experience in terms of budgeting in many departments. Additionally the requirement and space for public participation in this process has once again been lacking.

- *Census* Another matter that has again come to the fore is the much lamented and erroneous Census figures. While these have clearly been incorrectly and irresponsibly captured nothing appears to have been done to try to rectify it – this is a great shame as Makanas equitable share of Government funding depends on these statistics and the discrepancies translate directly to a situation of being short changed of ones entitled slice of the cake.
- Various *By-laws* continue to be drawn up as required by legislation and again public participation and feedback is called for in this process. Most notable of these has been the proposed By-laws relating to the hours of trade for liquor outlets. A lengthy process saw 17 license holders submit a lengthy memorandum (and virtual veiled ultimatum) calling for trading till 2am every night of the week and 3am on Fridays and Saturdays. Some very dubious logic was employed to motivate this position and certainly no regard for the economic effect of resultant noise on hospitality and tourism businesses was considered. Worth noting here is that the residents and tavern owners in the East of Grahamstown as well as Rhodes University supported the earlier closing times of twelve midnight weekdays and 2 am weekends. It is this agreement that was passed by council late last year and forwarded to Bihsho. It has though I believe since been referred back due to some procedural errors – again incompetence by highly paid municipal employees that impacts negatively on Grahamstown Residents.
- On *matters Aesthetic* the municipal committee has again met erratically due to the aforementioned dysfunction in the city engineer's office. Some matters have come before the committee and have dealt with successfully while, as we have become accustomed to, there are still many who seem to have a 'catch me if you can attitude' and generally the powers that be at present do not display any willingness

to act against them. Success stories include the now complete Haytons building with the Post Office as a tenant. Also I believe we are very fortunate with the impressive and professional restoration of the Lewis/Bon Marche building which is underway. Another success has been the negotiations and resultant approval of B&B signage. We still await tourism information graphics at the entry points to town.

- There are numerous other issues that the GRA has focused on that I could elaborate on time permitting – these include matters pertaining to the Hospital Board, the PPP project, SPCA and stray animals, the burgeoning Botanical Gardens, housing delivery, quarry rehabilitation, garden refuse sites and solid waste removal, demolition of residential properties for town house developments, bus stops and public toilets, matters Alicedale, DPS parking, and property valuation. We are though still fortunate to have a regular column that has returned to Grocotts, under new editorship, that gives us a voice and keeps us all informed. As always we are eternally grateful to our stalwart Hon Secretary for penning these eloquent and witty features.

I wish also again thank him for covering the rest of the association's secretariat duties with enthusiasm and dedication. Once more also a thank you to the GRA Management Committee who have diligently covered their relevant portfolios over the past year.

During these times of 'Mayor Madness' I wish as Chairperson of the Grahamstown Residents Association 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 and interests 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. Also to encourage family, colleagues and co-workers to join the GRA and get involved in the association to ensure succession.

Thank you.

Prof Dominic Thorburn

GRA Chairperson

27 March 2006