

# GRAHAMSTOWN RESIDENTS' ASSOCIATION

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*ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING – 27th MARCH 2007*

## **Chairperson's Report**

The past year has been an especially lively one for the GRA – one that has undoubtedly had its usual challenges for our committee, but also one that has called for essential public action and reaction. The commitment and loyalty from members of our Management Committee is noteworthy, and they have without exception actively embraced their roles. Once again all meetings of Municipal standing committees and Council have been attended, thereby ensuring constant scrutiny and vital monitoring of Council business. Our Honorary Secretary, Prof Roux van der Merwe, has consistently published concise and engaging monthly reports in Grocotts Mail – vital communications which keep the public at large informed and up to date on municipal business. Most recently we have also launched a website to further assist with disseminating GRA reports and information.

I believe the central role of the Grahamstown Residents' Association as a vigilant municipal monitoring forum has never been more important. We remain committed to the civic well being of all residents of our communities and have demonstrated that we are prepared to exercise our voice and take action when necessary. The GRA Memorandum to Makana, which is continuing to reverberate and elicit responses, is an example in point.

In reviewing the past year I was astounded to realize how little movement there had been in Makana and how slow and dysfunctional much service delivery remained. With this in mind I wish to briefly highlight just a few of the more noteworthy happenings and matters that the Association has engaged with during this period.

- The 2006 year started in a very leisurely manner with January apparently still 'Silly Season' in the council chambers with very little action of any sort. Slowly posters started appearing announcing the coming to town of the 'municipal election circus', clearly this forthcoming show was distracting councilors and officials from core business. Any normal City Hall routine was visibly giving way to rehearsing new acts and recruiting fresh players and performers. Much speculation abounded regarding the new line-up and it soon became clear to the GRA that most tried and tested 'old acts' would be replaced with 'new tricks' – in essence very few existing councilors would remain. Concern was expressed at the lack of essential high wire experience from so many new acts and that wobbles could result in the catch net not holding up under combined pressure! Of even greater concern was that the race for leadership of the municipal circus was being contested and that the party nominated mayor would be challenged for his ring leader role! Clearly some 'big guns' controlled the 'big top' and the municipal circus ring looked

increasingly like becoming a ruling party boxing ring. This political in-fighting has unfortunately not abated and continues to challenge the smooth running of the municipality. After much political clowning around a new mayor was swiftly cannon balled into the democratic spotlight, with the accompaniment of much traditional pageantry and celebration ... to be quickly followed by a court order against “the 39” key Kate detractors. Despite this initial intermission one was aware how urgently that ‘the show must go on’ – while basic services functioned the political management appeared to suffer from stage fright and virtual paralysis set in resulting in a 6 month hiatus....except of course for a R90 000 party to celebrate the inauguration of the new council and for them to presumably celebrate their exorbitant salaries being more than doubled!

- June 7th saw the GRA take to the streets with their own show, staging a well attended silent protest in Church Square, giving residents the opportunity to express their disquiet and concern over the unacceptable state of affairs – in essence the most serious dereliction of civic duty in municipal history!
- June saw portfolio meetings resume for the first time in the year and the municipal administrative merry-go-round slowly ground into operation again. The new mayor called for the posts of an IDP Manager, a Constituency Development Officer, and more recently a Communications and Media Officer (some would say spin-doctor) – more top level acts with no guarantees of helping service delivery on the ground, where dozens of vital posts are vacant with dire consequences.
- Mayor Kate cracked his whip in a move to close Executive Mayoral Committee meetings to the public, reduce councilor speaking rights, and also expand and centralise its role. A clear blow to democratic accountability and transparency. The mayor also took a targeted swipe at the Municipal Manager, addressing both his apparent ‘smoke and mirrors’ absenteeism, and lack of visibility and leadership. The first indications that this balancing act is probably also to be replaced with a new ‘juggler’.
- The Mayor cracked his whip again and took a salvo at the growling media, just one of a number to come. He accused Grocott’s Mail of “hostility toward the new council” and that the newspaper was a “platform for the council’s detractors”. The same bleat has been heard more recently from the elusive Municipal Managers corner, clearly with expectations that the newspaper should jump through their hoops. Press Freedom remains vital within our democracy and Grocott’s has become a most necessary critical and representative community voice in this regard.
- Mayor Kate made a call for a representative Business Chamber to interact with council – a good suggestion but one that the GRA has long made and pro-actively moved on with the establishment of Mr Beers’ Business Forum. I believe there have been positive new developments on this front (which we may hear more of later).

- Good news was that the Superior Courts Bill that was in the spotlight at our last AGM and had the potential to see Grahamstown's High Court drastically downsized with a ripple effect on the city, received a reprieve.
- On the financial side things appear to be in good hands with Mr Dredge at the 'box office' controls, but municipal debt has crept to around the R125 million mark with business and government owing a significant share. Debt collection has improved and the monthly books are generally in the black. Of concern is that the Salaries and Wages budget stands at 43% of total expenditure, while the National Treasury yardstick is 35%. Of this 43% the lions share appears to go to pay chiefs rather than Indians, again contributing to the significant lack of service delivery which requires human resources on the ground. This figure also needs to be seen in comparison to the crucial Repairs and Maintenance budget that only received a 6.5% slice of the proverbial pie! Knock on effects of this under funding and disregard for preventative maintenance are only too well known (more discussion on this later, I am sure).
- Good news was that almost 2000 houses have been built and that funding is awaited for about 600 more. Bad news is that R16 million has been budgeted for the plastering and resealing of 4000 RDP houses – this to rectify inferior cost cutting construction that was supervised by the municipality some years back. Funding for this has yet to be secured. Problems also remain with the registration, occupancy and subletting of RDP houses. Bucket toilets have been eradicated from well over 2000 homes with long standing promises of total eradication of the bucket system still being heard in the Council Chamber.
- Generally municipal administration has improved somewhat with most scheduled meetings starting on time, apologies and attendance being scrutinized, and minutes being disseminated timeously. Audibility though often remains challenging in meetings, despite a sophisticated microphone system.
- Recapitalization of essential infrastructure and equipment has been neglected for some time and we are undoubtedly starting to feel the fall-out with the numerous power outages and water reticulation problems. Preventative maintenance needs to be prioritized as a matter of urgency. This coupled with the loss of essential personnel and 'institutional memory' has seen key positions vacant, or filled and quickly vacated when the reality of the task is realized (again more discussion on this staffing issue will I am sure follow). Key here is accessing the state Municipal Infrastructure Grant – which Makana has done in the past but also ensuring that allocations are responsibly spent on time.
- Members of the GRA management visited the refuse dump to investigate reports of growing squatter community. While there were indeed a number of individuals living just off the site, and dependant on it, the situation was not irreversible and has been addressed by the municipality. Still on site as such, other good news is that the cleansing unit received a new refuse compactor and a roll-on unit – essential and long overdue equipment if the town is to

attempt to address its growing problems of litter and garbage (a problem that even the Auditor General noted in his report).

- The GRA is also keeping a watchful eye on the development of the R11 million Goat Farmers Co-op project. This is an undoubtedly ambitious attempt at employment creation through a goat milk and cheese dairy, with tourism and craft centre, conference facilities, restaurant, and cultural village.
- Most recently and probably most importantly the GRA came together to draw up what has become known as the GRA Memorandum to Makana – a document that addressed the groundswell of concerns of residents and business people at the deteriorating infrastructure of Grahamstown, the lack of preventative maintenance and re-capatilisation, and the loss of valuable and knowledgeable personnel. Electricity and water problems, experienced by all, are the most tangible problems but many others lurk around the corner. Concerns regarding future development and investment in Grahamstown under these conditions were expressed and constructive suggestions were made to address and redress the situation. Distress at the lack of communication from the municipality regarding these problems was also widespread. The memorandum was personally handed to the MM by the Hon Secretary and Chairperson, and the GRA has received a cordial written response. The GRA Memorandum has elicited widespread support and endorsement of the document has come from many stakeholders including the Business Forum, Rhodes University, Grahamstown Hospitality Guild, Grahamstown Foundation, and local schools. An open discussion around these issues and others will follow.

There are numerous other issues that the GRA has focused on in the past year that I could elaborate on time permitting. We are though fortunate to have a regular column Grocott's Mail, as previously mentioned, and more detail is always available to members for perusal in the minutes of our regular monthly meetings.

I wish to take this opportunity to thank the GRA Management Committee who have conscientiously covered their relevant portfolios over the past year. I also wish to sincerely thank Roux van der Merwe, our Hon Secretary, for continuing to write our entertaining column and also cover the rest of the association's secretariat duties with enthusiasm and dedication.

Lastly I wish to thank all GRA members for their continued support and interest in the association and its activities.

Thanks you.

**Prof Dominic Thorburn**  
*GRA Chairperson*

27 March 2007