

DRAMA – AND SOME PROGRESS

A Report from the Grahamstown Residents' Association

Punishment from Province: July saw quite a few hardy old issues make their way into – if not through – the labyrinth of Council decision-making. It was not dull, in parts, but on Friday 27 it became decidedly heated, as the Provincial Portfolio Committee for Housing, Local Government and Traditional Affairs came to Grahamstown on what can best be described as a “punitive expedition”. Chairperson Lulamile Nazo didn't mince his words, and apparently asked some awkward questions. As a result the credentials of the Grocotts reporter who did a very interesting coverage of the meeting (Grocotts, 31 July) have been questioned by the Council's touchy spin doctor in a rather confusing response (Grocotts 10 August). GRA will not argue the issues here, but Butana deserves credit for effectively bringing yet another “Closed” discussion out into the open. Clearly, the Municipal elite are not amused, and are on strained speaks with both local papers.

The Portfolio Committee has left, and the din has died down, and GRA hopes that our ruling elite may realise that they are not a law unto themselves. All this is also relevant to GRA's memo to the Treasury on some anomalies in the 2007 – 8 Budget. It has been referred to the Province, which has responded. We wait and see whether real transparency and public participation may again be restored. A nice start to “ensuring more participation from the public”, as Matabese holds out, would be once again to open the deliberations of the Mayoral Executive Committee, where all the important decisions are taken in comfortable seclusion from any accountability.

Liquor Trading Hours: Two other controversial issues are being passed from hand to hand, while generating a lot of heat and limited light. The Liquor Trading Hours By-law is proceeding, and in GRA's own representation Chairman Dominic Thorburn has broadly supported Council's compromise proposals. But he expressed concern at the social problems, and enjoins the Municipality to be realistic about the profit motive of Business, and to balance this against the rights of residents to some quiet on some nights. Also that our By-laws must be specific to Grahamstown's needs and should not slavishly follow precedents from elsewhere. Submissions from residents and community organisations, from East to West have all emphasised the crime fallout from excessive drinking.

Name Changes: The other hot potato, just warming up and with the potential to be hugely divisive, is the issue of name changes. The press columns are already buzzing, and GRA has asked Makana Tourism to press for its earlier double-barrelled suggestion of “Rhini Grahamstown” as a compromise, and so to limit the damage to what is an international Brand. Fresh news is that none other than FIFA has asked that familiar names be retained until 2010, so that football visitors may have some idea of where they are going. They too have suggested double-barrels for Pretoria-Tshwane; Bloemfontein-Manguang; and Port Elizabeth-Nelson Mandela Bay. In a country that needs healing, and not further polarisation the whole name change debate continues to be very unsettling.

Other movers, in brief, are:

The Goat Farm Project: R4m. has been received from the European Union, and a further R3.7m. applied for. Mr. Habana, Chair of the Business Chamber, has been appointed Manager, and ten farms have been identified as producers. But many questions remain. Given the distances on rural roads ranging from Alicedale to Salem, can a daily milk run to the central processing plant be viable – and what will the quantities be? Some good scientific advice has been taken, but will the rather temperamental milk goats and the inexperienced farmers cope with the conditions of the rural East Cape?

The Grahamstown – Port Alfred rail link has been given a thumbs-down. The line will not be viable for tourist traffic only, and costs of repair, maintenance and rolling stock will be high. More viable is Grahamstown – Alicedale, provided there can be two return trains daily, one from each end. This would support day trips and some commuting besides the freight which is crucial to the finances. Spoornet does not want it, but we hear that a private consortium is interested.

Grants-in-Aid: Sighs of relief could be heard from the Grahamstown Foundation and the Albany Museum who have at last received the grants to cover their not-inconsiderable rates. A clue to the hold up appears in an agenda item that says “grants are to assist organisations who cannot pay for services due to financial hardships”. GRA sees this as a misconception. Grants in the past have been to assist non-profit organisations who provide services to the Community, which the Municipality could only supply at a much higher cost. For example, sports facilities, the Monument, the Red Cross, the SPCA and the Albany Museum. As such, they deserve some support from the Municipality, and should not have to beg for it.

Still on Finance, the bad news in a SALGA report is that Municipalities, nationwide, are showing a consistent upward trend in under-spending of available funding; now 44% underspent in the last financial year. Debt levels also continue to rise, and are now R40 billion in national total. Other bad news, of course, is the 100% increase in rates for some in Grahamstown, but more of that later.

The good news is that our new Chief Financial Officer, Mr. Ngcelwane, is proving to be both active and articulate. While some of the revelations in his first Finance Committee report didn't seem to sit too well with some Councillors, his emphasis on more punitive credit control is to be welcomed. Naming and shaming consistent defaulters – some among big businesses – is a welcome departure from the years of pussyfooting with debtors.

Go Well: Sadly, long serving Sister Bulie Madlavu, head of the Social Services and Community Portfolio, has left us on a family move to Pretoria. She has been a well-respected and effective official, and will be sorely missed.

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Submitted by Roux van der Merwe, Hon. Secretary GRA, 8 Durban Street, Grahamstown.
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