

MESSY MEETINGS IN MAKANA

A Report from the Grahamstown Residents' Association

The worrying deterioration in the role and function of the Portfolio Committees was again apparent this last month. Except for Land and Housing, where there was no Chairperson, and several absent Directors, all our GRA observers reported meetings that were “short, with little discussion”. Except for the Aesthetics Committee, which has not met for 5 months.

Lack of any input on the sort of issues which Councillors are there to discuss, has been a regrettable reality for some while now. Directorates have been proactive in introducing a number of new and revised procedures for administration and service. Privileged outside bodies have allowed to make presentations; and By-laws have been flighted for updating. Mostly these have been merely noted and it is very seldom that any of these have provoked any questions or discussion, or the sort of inputs that Councillors should be making. Partly this is – more recently – due to inexperience, and no background on the issues before them. But it may also be a reaction to the “toy telephone” status of the Portfolio Committees, who receive little or no feedback on the decisions taken behind closed doors by the all-powerful Mayoral Executive. Either way, good municipal governance is not served by the current structures, and the consequences are now showing clearly.

Town Planning: Are we facing another round of problems in the Town Planning Department, which has seen some serious lapses since the departure of the Old Guard a few years ago? At one stage the entire function was being run by outside consultants. Great hopes were re-kindled by the arrival of Mr. Renier van der Merwe, who brought experience, energy and a commitment to enforcing some essential regulations. Without them, a town or city soon lapses into the sort of planning anarchy which leads inevitably to a messy and unattractive urban environment. The very antithesis of what an historic city like Grahamstown should be. For a while, hopes were realised, as by-laws were applied, and ad hoc and undesirable decisions and departures replaced by proper planning. As noted above, however, the Aesthetics Committee, tasked with applying many crucial guidelines, has not met for five months. Ominously, telephones ring unanswered in the Town Planning offices, officials cannot be found or contacted, and messages produce no results. Perhaps there is a reason? Vacancies, illness, over-commitment? Lack of support from above? Grahamstonians are owed an answer, and could our new Communications Officer not look into this please?

Property Rates: GRA's telephones continue to buzz with queries over the new rates. Increases in rates reported to us range from over 20% , to several around 100%, and a record 715% from one horrified property owner. From the last Finance Committee we learn that there is now one uniform national rate, determined by applying the factor of 0.00689 to the valuation of the property, carried out in 2005. The previous valuation occurred 18 years ago, and not surprisingly there have been some huge increases. Note that residents were given access to their new valuations last year, and a chance to query and dispute them. But what has happened since is causing concern and dismay , especially as the rating basis was never discussed in Council, or detailed in the Budget. Indeed there is a need for the Municipality to explain this basis to consumers, and perhaps to explore means of phasing in the burden that the increases bring. We do recall assurances from Mr. Dredge that with the adjustment of the rates base, increases would still be within the 10% ceiling laid down by Treasury.

Not Cricket: Wielders of the willow and the leather in Grahamstown East were overjoyed some two years ago to learn of a grant of R4m. to build a new Cricket Legacy Stadium in the Township. We now hear that the money has not materialised (or has it been hit for six?) and only the site has been cleared. No further funding appears to be in sight. Again, explanations please.

The Old Order Changeth: Grocotts Mail has generously made this column available for close to ten years now, and your columnist has tried dutifully to report on the roller coaster ride of Council affairs. He is now retiring, to be closer to family and the sea. Thanks to all those readers, known and often strangers, who said good things about the column and the GRA; and especially to those who do their bit by being members and so providing the necessary constituency and support for this watchdog to keep barking. Thanks to the Editor for his nice touch and ready sense of humour ; to the many journalists whom we have met and worked with; and lastly to the Council Officials, the Mayor, the Manager and the Councillors who have in the main accepted the GRA's role and cooperated with us in so many ways.

Go well. I will miss the hype and the deadlines and the problems. My successor as columnist – initially the Chairperson of the GRA – will I know continue to fill our monthly role in these pages of “SA's Oldest Independent Newspaper”. Now more than ever a vital – and independent – mouthpiece of the many varied and worthy citizens of our fair and historic City.

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

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