

THE GRA MONTHLY MONITOR.

The Grahamstown Residents' Association (GRA) Committee continues its vital municipal monitoring role, and posts at least one member in the public gallery to observe and scrutinize the reports and discussion at every Portfolio and Makana Council meeting. Portfolio meetings are held once a month and receive detailed reports from the departments they supervise. Councillors may question and comment, but not take decisions. Recommendations only can be made to the Mayoral Committee. The Corporate Services portfolio is not open to the public or press for the obvious reason that it deals with staff, and confidential or personal matters may arise. Similarly the Mayoral Executive Committee meets behind closed doors and is not open to the press, public or even regular Councillors. This is the Mayor's "cabinet privé" where the critical decisions are taken and plans made *in camera*.

The Aesthetics Committee has at last held a meeting again after many months of cancelled or postponed meetings. The GRA feels that it is imperative that this committee meets regularly as the economy of the town is intrinsically related to matters aesthetic. In addition a committee which never meets loses respect and its advice is ignored. It is the work of this voluntary committee which attempts to keep the unique and pleasing visual aspect of Grahamstown intact, and preserve its heritage and tourist potential.

The Goat Farms project reared its ugly head at the Economic Development and Tourism (EDT) meeting. This project has been monitored by the GRA since inception and there has been exceptionally inadequate and incomplete reporting from the managers. Substantial funding has been channelled into the initiative including a huge donation from the EU, which is in a trust account and cannot be utilised without the authorisation of the donors. Logistics seem lacking and the observation has been made that since there is no apparent demand for goat products in Makana the viability of the project must be questionable. The related spat between the DA and ANC members has been reported on Grocott's Mail. It appears that a Board of Trustees was appointed for the project, but the board was never constituted. The consultant employed, Ms Terry Myburgh, has not been available for meetings and nobody knows exactly what, if anything, is happening.

Staff shortages, amounting to a distressing 30%, in the Finance Department were the cause of a letter to the Mayor from the GRA. The letter has not as yet received a reply. More concern over this was raised when a report on Makana was tabled by Moody's, the New York credit rating firm which has absorbed CA Ratings, who were employed by the Municipality. They state that it is the decision of the municipality not to replace staff who resign in order to bring the salary bill down to a level closer to that recommended by the National Treasury (and presumably to afford to fund the inflated salaries of the top echelon). But this decision could clearly result in difficulties because staff are needed to maintain essential service delivery. A disturbing observation, especially since there are no less than 28 vacancies in the Roadworks, Water and Sewage divisions! Moody's rate credit worthiness of municipalities on a scale from 1-21 (1 being the least credit risk). Makana is rated at 12, but could have been 9 were it not for the lack of managerial capacity and succession planning; the maintenance backlog on municipal assets and the low income base of the municipality. They have spoken, who is listening?

Grahamstown Foundation is set to lose its 80% subsidy on rates after one year, but will benefit some from reduced tariffs in the latest property valuation. Nevertheless the Municipality requests the Foundation to make its facilities at the Monument available to them free of charge in the future. It does sound rather like taking away with one hand, and taking away with the other as well.

Councillors Fulani and Reynolds have been nominated as members of a budget task team to ensure that the budget adheres to guidelines of the National Treasury. This experience will surely be welcomed and hopefully keep the process on track.

A most undesirable development appears beyond the powers of the Makana Municipality. The Bhisho Health Dept is to cut the funding of the Makana Health Dept by 50% and plans to take over Municipal Health Services. Makana clinics have been functioning very well and deserve commendation. The less said about the dysfunctional Eastern Cape Health Dept the better.

Afraid of the dark? Well the company Kwezi V3 resigned as consulting electrical engineers to the Municipality and Ballenden & Robb were appointed in an emergency. It has been recommended that this appointment be made permanent since Ballenden & Robb did good work on restoring the Sugarloaf Hill substation and designed the existing network. They will be asked to provide managerial and skills training for the Municipal electrical staff – sorely needed.

The ‘name change issue’ continues and is surely a political move to draw fire from real issues of meagre service delivery. The GRA has attempted to be proactively involved in public participation on the matter since 2002 – even having representation on a Local Naming Committee that was democratically elected but never convened. The GRA believes that name changes should add substance and value to a shared heritage that could strengthen rather than polarize relationships within our town and society. We further recognize the role it can play in reconciliation and nation building. The economy of the town depends largely on its cultural heritage, historic tourism, education industry, and ‘branding’ established nationally and internationally over decades. Why compromise this economy? With this in mind we have proposed that the name Grahamstown is retained but that the name Rini is included. The names Grahamstown / Rini would be standardized as per national policy.

Finally we have heard more than one resident of late say ‘better the Municipal Manager you know, than the one you do not!’ Seems like time and the courts will tell.