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HERMANUS

RATEPAYERS ASSOCIATION

ANNUAL REPORT OF THE HERMANUS RATEPAYERS ASSOCIATION 2023

It has become customary to start the Annual report with a slogan or a quotation and this year I will write about THE GOOD, THE BAD AND THE UGLY.


The Good

- Following years of opposition to the ill-conceived proposal to build a BYPASS through the heart of suburban Hermanus by the HRA, Hands Off Fernkloof, Whale Coast Conservation and civil society at large the provincial Department of Infrastructure cancelled the project. This is a victory of the will of the people over the irrational planning by individuals removed from the realities on the ground but hellbent on having their way. The tens of millions spent during the planning phase could have been better used on improving existing roads in Hermanus. It was always the wrong project while other pressing problems were being ignored.
- Following the publication of the amended Valuation roll we assisted dozens of property owners with the completion of objections to their valuations, irrespective of whether they were members or not.
- Given our often stated concern for the environment we made a sizeable donation to the Cliff Path Management Group. This was motivated by the withdrawal by the OM of the funds normally made available from the Ward Committee allocation. It is gratifying to see the funds being put to good use. We have also succeeded in facilitating a degree of meeting of minds between the Cliff Path Management Group (CPMG) and the Cliff Path Action Group (CPAG) and the trustees of the Bayview Apartments which we believe will have long term benefits for the Cliff Path.
- Although the issues surrounding the future of the Hermanus Country Market are still not resolved our mediation efforts served to clarify some of the key factors which are at stake.

- Considerable time and effort have gone into modernising our communications with you our members. These include: a new corporate identity, a new user friendly website on a functional platform, fewer emails and more frequent WhatsApps on important and topical issues. This has led to encouraging renewed interest in the HRA. The Marketing team headed by Anne Stern has raised the profile of the HRA. Regular features in the Village News have resulted in a number of new memberships.
- We have continued to scrutinise Land Use Planning Applications on a regular basis and to comment where we feel that the “essential character” of Hermanus is under threat. More about this later.
- Following quite a rocky start our working relationship with the Mayor is currently on a more appropriate and mutually respectful footing. Issues we feel strongly about are taken heed of and we feel the freedom to meet with her, in order to give constructive feedback and make suggestions without it leading to conflict. This is in keeping with our ethos of working in cooperation with the municipality.
- It would be remiss of me not to make mention of the fact that on balance and despite our criticisms we are served by a municipality which is well run and strives to fulfill its mandate.

The Bad

- As Chairperson for the last 5 years it has been disappointing to see the dwindling support for the HRA in terms of renewed membership. There are many contributory factors, some of which have been under our control, but the many external factors have had the most serious consequences. From a paid up membership of 1650 in 2008 to 400 in 2010 and fewer than 200 in 2023 this is a catastrophic decline. The dwindling number of members willing to serve on the EXCO has been mirrored in the general decline in support. I am saddened by the lack of volunteerism experienced over a number of years but also reassured in a sense that this appears to be a widespread trend experienced by most NGOs. We could write volumes about the many varied and complex reasons but unless there is a perception that Hermanus needs an organisation to promote the interests of ratepayers our association’s existence may have come to an end. By the time you read this we will already have had our Special General Meeting and the future of the HRA will probably have been decided. The future of the HRA is in your hands.
- One of the spinoffs of our regular scrutiny of Land Use Planning Applications is a clear understanding of the extent to which *densification of the urban environment* is taking place. In fact it is a deliberate policy encouraged by the Municipality. This is both good and bad. The financial benefit is more rates income from more new, and upgraded properties. The downside is that there will be more people, more cars, more sewage, more water consumption and more demand for services from a growing and mainly affluent population. Where will it end? What is the long term plan to upgrade services? How is the municipality positioned to cope? What will Hermanus look like when most of the



properties have second dwellings and many of the single stories are now double stories? We are frustrated by the righteous indignation expressed by property developers who want to squeeze multi storey buildings with numerous apartments and parking for many cars onto inadequately sized plots in residential suburbs when their applications are objected to. Will we wake up when Hermanus looks like The Strand? There are always unintended consequences.

- A separate but related issue is the question of the long term financial viability of the Overstrand Municipality. For at least the past 10 years the basket of rates and charges levied by the OM has increased at a rate exceeding inflation. Our calls for this to change have gone unheeded and this is of concern. Wealthy property owners may be able to roll with the punches but the majority of ratepayers are not able to absorb rising costs. The increase in the population of the Overstrand over the last 5 years has not resulted in a concomitant increase in rates as most of the newcomers are not payers of rates but are nevertheless consumers of services. We agree with a recently published study that a radical reassessment of municipal finances projected over the next 5 to 10 years is necessary if we are going to successfully face this challenge.
- Fernkloof Nature Reserve (FNR) is often spoken of as the environmental jewel in Hermanus' crown. The reality however is that its future is uncertain as long as it remains under the Infrastructure and Planning directorate and as long as it is denied adequate funding to care for it properly. We have spoken in the past about "Future Proofing" FNR so that it cannot be carved up, developed or turned into an amusement park at some time in the future. Central to this is the current zoning which permits "consent use". FNR needs to be zoned in such a way as to protect it from a future municipality deciding to develop it. It also needs to be funded adequately, probably by a collective of private individuals so that it can be preserved for future generations.

The Ugly

- I live in a suburb which one could rightly classify as First World. The streets are clean and without potholes. The verges are mowed regularly and there are trees and well-tended gardens. Most homes have 2 cars, are well maintained, have high walls and security systems. Neighbours live in peace with one another and there is a fairly strong community spirit. Residents are either employed or comfortably retired. We live in a bubble. This is not the norm in the greater Hermanus. A stone's throw away there are tens of thousands of poor unemployed people whose living conditions verge on squalor. Most people survive on social grants and handouts. The contrast in living conditions needs to be seen to be believed. In a wider sense these people are our neighbours. Unless we launch some kind of initiative to address the disparities, to create jobs, to improve living standards, to address the indignities these people face we will not be able to preserve our current standard of living. Our bubble will burst. Civil Society organisations like the HRA with the OM, need to work together to live out the OM credo of "Overstrand for All". In this regard the HRA has in conjunction with HPP undertaken to bring together concerned individuals from across the societal spectrum in order to address the issue of Vagrancy, Homelessness and Unemployment as we experience it particularly in the CBD. This initiative is in its infancy and will develop during the course of 2024.



In closing

I joined the HRA in 2018 and after a very brief period was voted in as the Chairperson. The last five and a half years have been a bit of a roller coaster ride with many highs and lows. I'm saddened that at the end of my tenure the HRA faces an uncertain future and my hope is that sanity will prevail and that a new EXCO can and will breathe new life into this organisation. Whatever the outcome of the AGM and whichever direction it takes, the HRA has given me an opportunity to grow and learn and to make a contribution to our community. There are many things which we did of which I am proud and have very few regrets. I am satisfied that in matters of principle I always strove to do the right thing. I leave older and wiser, with a lot of new friends and have been enriched by the experience.

Brian Wridgway