

Chairmans Report 2009

2009 has been a very challenging year for all the portfolio holders on your Executive Committee. The Municipality has been in political and financial crisis for most of the year, resulting in a negative impact on service delivery, which has also been reflected in the attitude and performance of many Municipal officials.

Starting with budgetary issues, for the past few years the Municipality has over-extended itself in terms of external loans, resulting in a crisis that necessitated a significant reduction in the capital budget, while simultaneously demanding a large increase in revenue. While the world was in economic meltdown, George Municipality just kept on borrowing and spending. As a result, we have had to suffer the withdrawal of our additional rebate, previously allowed for the reduced public service infrastructure compared to George. Their basis for this withdrawal was ill-conceived and unfounded, and we are working towards having it reinstated for the next financial year. The next Municipal windfall, at the expense of all residents of George, was in their pricing structure for electricity. George Municipality applied the high Eskom tariff increase to the price at which they sell to us, when all that was affected was the price at which they buy from Eskom. In other words, their profit, which is added to the price they pay Eskom before they sell on to us, was also increased by in excess of 30%. We are still waiting for an explanation of where the acknowledged extra money is being spent, and have reinforced the message that this must not happen again during the next cycle of high Eskom tariff increases.

The Services (sewerage, water and electricity) Portfolio under the stewardship of Pearce Johnston was very active. Pearce was in attendance at all public liaison meetings for the Sands Road Sewerage System. The project is progressing well, and upgrading of the road surface is expected to be completed before our AGM in December 2009. It is anticipated that the completed system will be commissioned in March 2010. Additionally, Pearce held meetings with the Head of Civil & Technical, Harold Basson, to discuss matters of interest to our members that included capital contributions, equivalent erven, punitive water tariffs, Touw River pollution, and water quality from Wilderness Water Treatment Works. Capital contributions remain an issue with the Association, firstly because they virtually doubled the contribution required for sewerage projects this year, and secondly, because we are still investigating if they are even allowed to charge such contributions to existing ratepayers. Capital contributions were intended to extract money from developers to enable a Municipality to expand the public infrastructure required for the development. The legislation is unclear as to the retrospective application of capital contributions to established ratepayers. Water quality, both potable and in the Touw River is constantly monitored, and has remained within acceptable levels throughout the year. Punitive water tariffs for Wilderness were resisted as we draw all our water from the Touw River, and have no impact on the level of water in the George Dam. Since the whole of Eden has been declared a drought disaster area, we await the publication of district water regulations, and will respond accordingly. Throughout all the trials and tribulations, Pearce had managed to maintain a cordial relationship with Civil & Technical Department.

Pearce also held regular meetings with the Head of the Electrical Department, Kevin Grunewald, to discuss electrical matters affecting our area. These included the street lighting system, distribution, and proposed upgrading of the network for our area. Our relationship with this Department remains good and we receive timely and regular warnings of planned power outages which could affect Wilderness. SA National Roads (SANRAL) were contacted regarding the control of street lighting on the N2, and they responded quickly to solve the problem of street lights coming on early and being extinguished late in the day.

A new Portfolio was created this year to represent Business and Tourism interests in our area. The portfolio is headed by Vicky Nel, very ably assisted by Inez Jamieson and by Pieter Naudé who volunteered for secondment to the Executive Committee for this purpose. Wilderness is by far the greatest tourism asset that George has. Unfortunately it does not receive the attention

and funding commensurate with its status and value, either from George Tourism or George Municipality. Several meetings regarding tourism were held with the Executive Mayor, and various other councillors and Municipal officials. These meetings only served to confirm that formal tourism structures at the Municipality are in complete disarray, with no effective structure in place to maximise tourism potential. Aside from the lack of promotion of tourism, Vicky feels that not enough is done by the Municipality to maintain Wilderness in a pristine state, and has set the objective for next year to ensure the continued existence of our area as the gem of the Garden Route. Vicky, Inez and Pieter, attended various local tourism meetings, although none feel comfortable, as yet, that there is a sustainable strategy for the future. To fill a void, Pieter set out to create a "Welcome Pack" for the area that promotes the Association through the promotion of our area. The pack started out as an information guide for new residents that also encouraged them to join our Association. It soon became apparent that the pack could be expanded to also include information for tourists and other transitory visitors. The end result is, we believe, a super reflection of our area, its facilities, and all its charms. Even more importantly, Pieter managed to obtain sponsorship for the project from SANParks, Palms Wilderness Resort, Rondevue Cafe, Pam Golding Estate Agency, and People in Graphics, so there was minimal cost to the Association for this excellent brochure.

Inez Jamieson and Peter Woodliffe championed the Environmental and SANParks Portfolio. Monthly meetings took place with the Manager of Wilderness National Park, Jill Gordon, or one of her representatives, which kept the committee up to date with work in progress at SANParks. The boardwalk alongside the lagoon was an ongoing saga. Provincial disaster flood damage funds were never received by the park and tenders submitted for repairs were impossibly high. However a solution was found with SANParks staff from Knysna working over weekends to do the necessary repairs. After all the objections to the fencing around the lagoon, everyone is now in agreement that it has helped reduce the noise, litter and drunkenness in the picnic area. However it has caused Freesia Rock to become a venue for the unsavoury element. Over the December holidays, personnel from both George Municipal Safety & Security Department and SANParks will ensure appropriate entry and egress from the lagoon. This action is likely to encourage the more unruly elements to use the Kleinkrantz beach.

Wilderness will become the Gateway into the New Garden Route National Park, which will result in much development of infrastructure to upgrade the area, such as better toilet facilities and parking, etc. Jill Gordon has been very proactive in preparing for the breaching of the Touw River mouth every time there has been indication of heavy rain. Unfortunately little rain has been seen. Alien weed clearing has been done in various areas around the Park. "Working for Water" teams have cleared areas of Lantana, Spanish reeds and Madeira Vines. This is however an ongoing exercise and various conservancies have been formed to clear their areas of aliens. This is something that we can all do by keeping our gardens alien free.

Al Colesky, our Deputy Chairman, and Pierre Bovet, our Treasurer, shared the Safety & Security Portfolio with Al taking responsibility for community policing issues, and Pierre taking on Neighbourhood Watch responsibilities. Community Police Forum meetings were attended by Al who reports that there is an occasional lack of attendance by senior police officers, and an almost complete absence of George Municipality's Safety and Security personnel. However, crime seems to be generally under control, with very few violent crimes, but a noticeable increase in petty theft. We have warned our members on a number of occasions not to leave loose articles visible in vehicles, as this is the highest risk crime in George at the moment. As far as our area is concerned, Pierre reports that crime is still very low, although an increase in beach muggings has been noted. At one point in the year, the village became almost overrun with inebriated beggars, and self-appointed car guards. While we sympathise greatly with those of our residents who are unemployed, the situation was becoming out of control, firstly with the sheer number of vagrants, and secondly with their increasingly intimidating behaviour. As a result, the Association ran a very successful poster

campaign in restaurants and businesses in the village, designed to discourage such unlicensed and self-appointed car guards.

Al Colesky also has responsibility for the Health & Refuse Portfolio, and in the latter half of the year took over responsibility for the Emergency Services & Disaster Management Portfolio from myself. In the former, Al has been in contact with the Municipality regarding illegal dumping of garden and other refuse on empty stands, or in adjacent bush. We know it is really inconvenient not having a Municipal garden refuse site in our area, but this does not justify the random dumping of refuse on other people's property. The Municipality will remove up to 7 bags, or bundles of combined household and garden refuse, so we encourage you to use this facility to its fullest extent. If you have excess capacity, offer it to your neighbour, or ask your neighbour if you can make up their capacity if you need to. We have to work together on this in order to keep our neighbourhoods clean and rubbish-free. On the Emergency Services and Disaster Management front, the promised satellite fire station has not materialised in as close proximity as we would have liked. Instead of being located at Kleinkranz, the Municipality eventually settled on Hoekwil as the preferred location. The newly commissioned Disaster Management Centre has only just come on stream, so for most of the year we had no access to the Early Warning SMS system. Hopefully, we will shortly be back on stream with this service.

Our Traffic, Roads and Pavements Portfolio, handled by Richard Ledger, and initially assisted by Vicky Nel, was also busy for the year. As usual, we found ourselves at the bottom of the list for paving and resurfacing of roads. Such a poor job was done on the resurfacing of some roads, that they are already breaking up again. We had the opportunity to host Harold Basson, head of the Municipal Civil and Technical Department, and his head of roads department, Jacques Quinot, for a tour of the worst affected areas. The fundamental problem with road maintenance is that there is never enough money in the budget for our area, and based on the present financial crisis, this does not look as though it will change in the immediate future. One point of agreement was that expenditure needs to be prioritised according to the social implications of particular roads. For example, while the entrance to the village may only be scheduled for maintenance on a predetermined fixed period cycle, the high visibility and usage of the area may provide cause to reschedule upgrades to an earlier budget cycle. Sue Ledger was seconded to the committee in the latter part of the year when concerns were raised regarding the proclaimed rerouting of the N2 across the Island Lake vlei, through Ebb & Flow, and over Wilderness Heights. Sue took on this subject as a dedicated responsibility, and is in communication with National, Provincial, and Local authorities in this regard. Some of you may have noted from our newsletters that no development of this rerouting is likely to take place within the next ten to fifteen years. We are taking a position that this is a good thing as it gives the authorities ten to fifteen years to find an alternative route. We are therefore pressing ahead with our demand that this proposed section of the N2 be de-proclaimed sooner rather than later. On a more local note, Peter Woodliffe successfully assisted with the acquisition and positioning of the long-outstanding speed limit, and "look out for children" signs along Lake Road.

My own main portfolio of Town Planning held many challenges this year. I think we can all point to a number of inappropriate developments that George town planners have mysteriously approved, and we have been vociferous in our objections to these, although the general response has been that the buildings are "within regulations". One development, however, has been the centre of controversy for over a year. From the time the plans were illegally drawn, submitted, and approved by the municipality, we have been in a constant dogfight with Planning and Housing Department. Environmental laws were broken, the building itself exceeds all the allowed regulatory parameters and does not even comply with the illegally approved plans. Municipal officials, including the Director of Planning and Housing, have acknowledged the illegal nature of the development, but contend that there is nothing they can do about it. We lodged an official complaint with the Executive Mayor, but while a number of

investigations have been promised by the Municipal Manager, none have as yet been forthcoming.

Earlier this year it was our intention to launch a civil action against the Municipality, and while our case was very strong, the financial implications were too onerous for us to continue. As an alternative, we have lodged formal complaints with the South African Council for the Architectural Profession against the architects involved, and with the Public Protector who will investigate the Municipality in this regard.

At council level, we had several meetings over the course of the year with the Executive Mayor, Mr Flip De Swardt; Member of Parliament for George, Mr Marius Swart; and our Ward Councillor Mr Adriaan Kruger. Flip De Swardt and Marius Swart attended our August Executive Committee meeting where we expressed our concerns and grievances over the declining level of service delivery in relation to our escalating contributions to the treasury. As a result, our Executive Committee was invited to address the Mayoral Executive Committee, and the entire Senior Management team at the Municipality. The interaction at this meeting was lively, but cordial, and a number of undertakings were given to us that are being worked on, but many of which we will only see the results of in 2010. Our follow-up list is long. In addition to this, as Chairman of the Association, I continued to attend Ward Committee meetings. I am not as discouraged by the Ward Committee process as some, and find that we at least have the opportunity to get issues on record. Whether or not the municipality acts on these issues remains contentious, but the fact remains that we are producing a paper trail that at some stage will have benefit.

To end on a positive note, our membership base is growing and remains strong. However, we always need more members, so please encourage your neighbours to join and support our efforts, if they are not already members. Sylvia Sell, as Secretary, with the additional responsibility of managing the Communications and Liaison Portfolio, has done another outstanding job this year. Regular electronic newsletters and press releases were issued, and every month the notice board in the village is also updated. Many compliments have been received as a result of the newsletters, for which we thank you. The website remains an advantage, and was upgraded this year with a completely new look. Our thanks go to Imel Rautenbach of Office Reliance for this service.

Sylvia and Pierre Bovet jointly run the Administration Portfolio, taking responsibility for keeping our database in order, and driving the subscription renewal process. Not the most glamorous portfolio, but certainly an essential one that they manage professionally. Pierre is also Treasurer of the Association, and will supply you with his own financial report at the AGM.

As Chairman of the Association, I would like to thank all the Executive Committee members for their time, expertise, and dedication to community interests. I would also like to thank you, our members, for your active support and encouragement. Long may it continue.

Graham Sell
Chairman