

Chairmans Report 2010

2010 was another very challenging year for your Executive Committee. Political control of the council changed hands twice, from a DA/ID coalition to an ANC/ID coalition, then back to a DA/ID coalition, resulting in the appointment of three different Executive Mayors. Such political turmoil within George Council meant that we suffered through another year where party politics took precedence over service delivery. Service delivery disruption also occurred through the suspension of five senior Municipal officials, including the Municipal Manager, Financial Director, Deputy Financial Director, Chief Traffic Officer and the Director of Safety & Security. Disciplinary hearings remain to be held, and no charges have yet been published. In a more positive development, your Association has been instrumental in bringing together several Ratepayers Associations to jointly address Council on matters of common concern. Since coming together in January, the Affiliated Ratepayers and Residents Association (ARRA) has held meetings with the Provincial MEC for Local Government, Mr Anton Bredell, the latest George Executive Mayor, Ald. Bazil Petrus, the Member of Parliament for George, Mr Marius Swart, and the Premier of the Western Cape, Ms Helen Zille. While some progress has been made as a result of these meetings, it has also been made clear to us that, across all political parties, if they are given a choice between acting in the best interests of the people, versus acting in the interests of the party, the party will always come first. Having said that, I have no doubt that the combined strength of ARRA is making an impact on political thinking, and we will continue to strive for transparency and accountability in local government. Hugh Pharoah and Pieter Naudé provided invaluable support in developing this new area of endeavour. As mentioned earlier, ARRA addresses issues of common concern to all residents of George, whereas your Association continues to address issues that directly affect our members in Wilderness. The following are our local portfolio reports:

Budgetary matters, handled by myself, Hugh Pharoah and Pierre Bovet, remain a significant cause for concern as the Municipality continues with profligate borrowing and spending patterns. In December 2009 we called them to account regarding the introduction of emergency water tariffs before permission to do so was granted by National Treasury, which resulted in refunds being made to residents. Our efforts were also predominant in forcing the Municipality to rescind their decision to withdraw the 6kl of “free” water, resulting in its reintroduction, together with further refunds being made to residents. The suspension of five senior Municipal officials is costing ratepayers a huge amount of money, and we have been questioning why there has been such a long delay in proceeding with disciplinary hearings. We also continue to contest the legality of the 2010/11 budget that was approved by Council. The Municipal Finance Management Act requires that Municipal budgets be based on realistic estimates of revenue, and that expenditure is then planned accordingly. Due to the drought, water usage is down by around 40%, and is likely to remain at this level because usage patterns have been permanently altered. In the revenue forecast, the Municipality did not take into account the reduced consumption, and actually predicted a 14% increase on pre-drought consumption numbers. This is patently overestimating revenues, and as a result they have resorted to perpetuating “emergency” tariffs to try to make up the difference. We have appealed to National Treasury officials to intervene as it is our contention that the Municipality should be tightening their belt by eliminating, or deferring, non-essential borrowing and spending, rather than continuing to extort additional money from residents under false pretences. Our fight against the water tariffs does not include the removal of water restrictions as we believe that the reality of water shortages is with us to stay, and that the modified behaviour towards this scarce resource is to be commended and perpetuated. However, we do object to the Council using the drought as an excuse to cover losses

occasioned by inaccurate budgeting.

The **Town Planning Portfolio** has been in the very capable hands of John Callanan, assisted by Hugh Pharoah. John tackled a total of 21 applications for departure/relaxation, resulting in objections being made to twelve, and support being given to eight. In the remaining case we initially objected to the proposed relaxation, but subsequently John and Hugh met with the owner on site and agreed to support a revised application. Although often frustrated by a lack of response from Council, the Town Planning team have achieved some significant successes, such as the partial demolition of an illegal building, and the issue of a directive from Council in the case of an owner who had illegally cleared a forest plot in Constantia Kloof. We have drawn irregularities committed by officials in the Planning Department to the attention of Management in two instances, and also followed up serious irregularities relating to a Sands Road property with the Public Protector. A number of letters received from members complaining about possible irregularities and sundry other matters have been investigated and feedback provided. Two meetings were held during the year with the Deputy Director of Planning, Mr Stiaan Carstens to discuss matters of concern. Meetings were also held with Kobus Munro of Setplan, who is the consultant tasked with producing a new Spatial Development Plan for Wilderness. We have also co-operated with WaLEAF, on a number of issues, including an on-site visit to evaluate a response to aesthetic requirements imposed on a property by Council.

Numerous letters and emails remain unanswered regarding the erection of illegal signage in Wilderness. Management in the Town Planning Department have acknowledged that a number of signs we have drawn their attention to are illegal, yet no action has been taken to ensure their removal. As a result, we have submitted a formal complaint against a Building Control Officer to the Executive Mayor and Acting Municipal Manager.

The **Services Portfolio** (sewerage, water & electricity) was active with Pearce Johnston attending all meetings relating to the Sands Road project. Although underground electrical cables have been laid in Sands Road, funding individual connections is problematic, so the overhead power lines are still operational. Pearce was also in the forefront of ensuring that speed calming measures were reinstated in Sands Road.

There was a private initiative to erect a desalination plant in Kaaimans. Pearce attended several meetings on the subject, although there seems to have been no appetite for the project at Municipal level. As a result, the project appears to have been shelved, although we will continue to monitor any renewal of activity in this regard. On another water-related topic, continuous water quality monitoring has been undertaken by George Municipal Laboratories both on drinking water, and on the status of our rivers. We receive regular reports from the Municipality and keep a close eye on results.

Pearce has again maintained excellent relations with Harold Basson and Lindsay Mooiman, Senior Managers of Civil & Technical Department, and with Kevin Grunewald, Head of the Electrical Department, and his staff.

The **Business & Tourism Portfolio** headed by Vicky Nel, supported by Inez Jamieson and Pieter Naudé has also faced its share of challenges. Contrary to expectations, the 2010 World Cup did not bring floods of tourists to the Garden Route as an add-on to their soccer experience. Tourism in the Garden Route is said to be around 60% down on 2009, with many tourism related businesses struggling to stay afloat. The demise of the iconic Choo-Tjoe on the Knysna-George route has had a major impact on the local economy, and we are presently looking to provide more focus on achieving its reinstatement. The sustainable employment opportunities that this could generate for local people cannot be ignored. Unfortunately, tourism marketing for the area is under the control of George Municipality who have few skills and even less money to undertake a meaningful promotional programme. Of the R2,4m

Municipal budget for tourism, R2m is earmarked for salaries and infrastructure. On the other hand, the Municipality did manage to find around R4m to host the 3-day Sevens Rugby, and several more millions to upgrade the pitch at the Outeniqua Stadium to FIFA standards for the Japanese soccer team to use for around 10 days. We are presently engaged in an initiative to reintroduce the Wilderness Eco Tourism Association (WETA) to promote our area, although we will still require some funding from the Municipality to turn this into a reality.

Inez Jamieson again championed the **Environmental and SANParks Portfolio**, developing and maintaining excellent relationships with local Park Manager, Gill Gordon and her team. We are kept informed of their plans and problems, and are aware that the World Cup was disastrous for SANParks as they had fewer bookings than usual across all parks. As a result, they are financially stressed. Even so, the Island Lake visitors area received a facelift, and a new ablutions block was built. Freesia Rock remains an acknowledged problem regarding gate opening and closing times. SANParks has managed to stop development of the N2 Knysna section until proper environmental studies are done for the entire Knysna-Wilderness route. The reed cutter has been used to open the Serpentine and other channels, a new culvert was constructed on the Hoekwil Road, and the Serpentine narrows was deepened with an additional channel cut to improve the flow of flood water. Peter Woodliffe assisted Inez on flood prevention issues, although with the present drought, there has not been a flood event. With the clearing of the second arch of the Hoekwil Bridge, and SANParks' proactive opening of the Touw River Mouth by bulldozing a channel in advance if advised of potentially heavy rainfall, we hope that most events of catastrophic flooding may be averted in future.

Alien vegetation remains a serious problem, but Working for Water teams have done good work on clearing the various SANParks trails and other areas. Homeowners should be particularly aware of Madeira Vine and Lantana growing on their properties. There are two Working for Water poverty relief teams that have been trained and will assist with clearing and eradication.

With increasing unemployment due to the economic recession, poaching on the lakes has become a major problem. Please report anyone seen using gill nets, or fishing after hours.

The **Traffic, Roads & Pavements** Portfolio under the stewardship of Richard Ledger, also had a busy year. Highlights include the creation of a deceleration/turn lane on the N2 at the North Street exit in the direction of Knysna; the erection of danger signs at critical points in Heights Road; the erection of safety stakes on Whites Road to mark washed away edges; red and white danger markings painted atop Hillside Road, although much more remains to be done where the edges are too steep for normal danger stakes; the erection of speed limit and children warning signs in Lake Road and Kingfisher Close. Richard also cajoled the Municipality into undertaking pothole repairs across the area.

Co-opted member, Sue Ledger, continued her efforts with SANRAL on the **N2 Highway Portfolio**. Sue has received a written undertaking from SANRAL that they will review the alternative N2 routing that proposes to take the highway through the wetlands at Island Lake. The new Spatial Development Plan for Wilderness also makes mention of the need to encourage SANRAL to de-proclaim the present alternative route, so we have support for our efforts in this regard. We do not see any immediate threat that the road will ever be built, but we are still committed to pursuing the goal of guaranteeing that it never is. Sue was also instrumental in motivating SANRAL to place additional reflective chevrons on the "Death Bend" wall in Kaaimans Pass. The original markings were both too small and incorrectly positioned for proper reflection, making them inadequate at night. Also on a positive note, the Parks & Gardens section of the Municipality is to be highly commended for their rapid response to Sue's request for clean-up and maintenance of the plant pots located on the Touw River Bridge.

The **Safety and Security Portfolio** headed by Al Colesky, supported by Pierre Bovet had, by their standards, a disappointing year. Communicating with Council on safety matters proved to be an exercise in futility. The suspension of the Director of Safety & Security and the Chief Traffic Officer at the Municipality exacerbated the situation, with the result that most of the departments ignore incoming communications, sometimes to the point of not even answering their telephones. Communication with the SAPS on the other hand has been very good, and the crime rate in Wilderness remains fairly low. One of the biggest problems has been house break-ins that occurred during the owner's absence. All homeowners are once again reminded to ensure that your properties are properly secured, and to be extra vigilant over the holiday season. Monthly Neighbourhood Watch meetings have been basically well attended by the "faithful". Pat Walsh stepped down as Chairman of the Neighbourhood Watch Committee during the year, and Al was voted into the position at their AGM. WRRRA would like to add our thanks to Pat for his years of dedication to the community, firstly through his participation in the Association, and then for his many years of service on the Neighbourhood Watch. We also add our congratulations to Al on his appointment as Chairman of Neighbourhood Watch.

On top of her Secretarial responsibilities for the Association, Sylvia Sell continued to manage the **Communications and Liaison Portfolio** with her customary efficiency. Electronic newsletters receive many compliments from members, and our press reports are regularly printed in the Wild News and The Edge. Sylvia, together with Pierre Bovet, also manages the **Administration Portfolio**. With a rapidly increasing membership, maintenance of the database and mailing lists is a major task, again handled with customary efficiency. The website remains an important tool, and I would like to once again thank Imel Rautenbach, of Office Reliance, for his fast and unstinting support in maintaining the site to a very high standard. Pierre Bovet remained as Treasurer of the Association, and he will provide his financial report separately at the AGM.

In another positive development, we have forged closer ties with the **Kleinkrantz** community which has resulted in Colleen Simons accepting a secondment to the committee. Colleen is tasked with a liaison role that will hopefully bring a greater understanding of inter-community issues, and foster a more cooperative approach to service delivery.

In closing, I would like to thank all the Executive Committee members for contributing their expertise, and for their hard work and dedication to community interests over the course of the year.

Al Colesky and Peter Woodliffe have decided to step down from the Committee, so I would like to signal special appreciation to them for the work done over the years. Al has served on the committee for many years, is a past Chairman of the Association, and we wish him well in his continuing role as Chairman of the Neighbourhood Watch. Peter has been mainly concerned with flooding issues, and believes that sufficient measures are now in place to make his position redundant. Peter's offer to accept secondment to the committee should the need arise will be welcomed, although we hope it will prove to be unnecessary.

It is increasingly important to have strong community participation in local government affairs, so I would also like to once again thank you, our members, for your continued active support and encouragement. Long may WRRRA continue to grow.

Graham Sell
Chairman