

2011 Chairman's Report

Our 40th Anniversary year has seen changes in the political balance of our council with the Democratic Alliance winning the majority of seats in the March Local Government Elections. Having an outright majority should allow the Council to forge ahead with a cohesive Service Delivery plan, without the distraction of having to also satisfy a coalition partner, as has been the case in the past. It remains a disappointment, however, that the DA has chosen to re-appoint certain self-serving Councillors to positions of power, in one case going so far as to create a new, and unnecessary, full-time councillor position at our expense. On a positive note, our Ward Councillor, Leon van Wyk, has been appointed as a member of the Mayoral Executive Committee and also as the head of the Finance Sub-committee. Leon is a qualified Chartered Accountant with in-depth experience of business development, so we are hopeful he will be instrumental in turning around the dire financial situation that currently faces the Municipality.

We also hope he will be able to influence Council to respond more favourably to our local Wilderness needs and requirements than previously experienced. History, however, tells us not to become complacent because of the apparent stability in Council, and the eminent qualifications of our Ward Councillor. Such is the nature of our present party-based political system that we know that party politics will always take precedence over service delivery, and that delivery preference will always be given to where the majority of votes can be garnered, irrespective of the financial contribution made to Municipal coffers. You can be assured that we will continue to actively engage Council for the benefit of all in Wilderness, and will also continue to strive for transparency and accountability in local government. As far as your Executive Committee is concerned, we have some changes of our own coming along. Vicky Nel has already resigned from the Tourism Portfolio as a result of taking up employment in Botswana. Pierre Bovet has decided to call it a day after eight years as Treasurer for the Association, and Richard and Sue Ledger are standing down as they will be spending more time out of the area, and do not feel that they can continue to do justice to their combined Roads Portfolio. During the year we also recorded the passing of Al Colesky, a past Chairman of WRRRA, and Chairman of the Wilderness Neighbourhood Watch. Al will be missed by the community he served so well. The following are our local portfolio reports:

Budget Rates & Taxes matters are still a significant cause for concern as the Municipality remains in a very precarious financial state. Income for the financial year to date is down and bad debts are significantly higher, so balancing the books is becoming a daunting task. The inability to borrow any more money is also detrimental to service delivery targets. Once again Council has approved an unrealistic budget, with the result that there is no money available for proper maintenance of Municipal infrastructure in Wilderness. There is another General Property Revaluation underway, and we hope to have sight of the draft roll before the end of the year, although experience again tells us that it is likely to be available only in January/February 2012. This process is going to be very challenging as we all know that property prices have dropped more significantly in Wilderness than in other parts of George, yet the Municipality needs to collect more money rather than less. Our approach on this subject has always been that the process must be fair and equitable in terms of services received for the money paid. We have therefore already raised the issue of reintroducing a rates rebate for Wilderness in view of our reduced public service infrastructure compared to George proper. Salaries and allowances for Councillors and Officials are generally considered to be excessive, with too many "consultants" being employed at highly inflated costs. A part-time councillor, for example, receives around R193,000 per year in salary and allowances, which is extortionate in comparison to the contribution they make. Then there are the Proportional Representation Councillors who are paid the same amount for representing their political parties, rather than representing us, who pay them. Add to that the other overheads

and support costs, and we are paying in excess of R7,5m per year in support of the party faithful whose only contribution to the running of George is to vote the way their party caucus tells them. Cases against the five suspended senior Municipal officials, including the Municipal Manager, Financial Director, Deputy Financial Director, Chief Traffic Officer and the Director of Safety & Security have apparently been finalised after almost two years, and we are awaiting an answer to our request for details of the final dispositions and costs involved. Once again, we look to Cllr van Wyk to use his expertise to return some sanity to the financial affairs of the Municipality, and we stand ready to work creatively with Council to achieve the promised “better life for all”.

Town Planning

John Callanan

This has again been an exceptionally busy year and I would like to thank Graham for all the assistance he has given me throughout the year. I am not going to bore you with statistics, suffice to say that we have once again received numerous applications for departures / relaxations during the past year. This is the second year now that I have handled the planning portfolio and the experience gained confirms that it is imperative that we always adopt an even handed approach to all of the applications we receive. To this end each one is thoroughly scrutinised and judged on its merits before submitting our response to Council. We have done our best to ensure that we have been consistent with our stated aim in this regard, and although it is not the norm for us to reverse our initial response to an application, we do try and keep an open mind at all times. We also do not make a habit of personally meeting on site with homeowners who have applied for a departure / relaxation because of time constraints, but we have on very rare occasions made an exception to this rule where we felt that this was warranted by unique circumstances. Whenever supporting an application for a relaxation we invariably add a rider to the effect that we reserve the right to support any neighbours who lodge an objection. We have invoked this right on one occasion this year where we felt the neighbours who had objected had a valid argument, and the owner had adopted a very highhanded attitude. We have once again seen many instances where owners go ahead and build without obtaining prior approval or make major unplanned changes along the way. A worrying aspect in this regard is the cavalier approach sometimes adopted by Municipal Officials to these blatant deviations. The Planning Portfolio members have met with Stiaan Carstens, the Deputy Director, Planning, every 3 months during the year to discuss matters of mutual concern. These meetings are generally constructive and on the whole have proved to be useful. Although often frustrated by the tardiness and lack of response from Council we have managed to resolve a number of problems. I mention a few examples, namely the disparity with some of the street names in Constantia Kloof where the George Municipality did not recognize the names allocated by the old Wilderness Council. We have also had some success with the removal of illegal signage, although many remain outstanding for removal. Minutes are kept of these meetings which are circulated to all participants to facilitate following up on all outstanding issues. It is Council’s prerogative to overrule any objections received, but we in turn have the right to appeal any such decision. We have lodged an appeal against one such decision this year and the outcome is still pending. We also co-operate with WaLEAF on matters of mutual concern. Finally the problems surrounding Erf 141 have been investigated by the Public Protector who found in our favour, albeit too late to have any influence on the development. Town Planning admitted to making mistakes, and assured the Public Protector that mechanisms were now in place to prevent a recurrence. We agreed to let the matter rest there, but we remain vigilant.

Pearce Johnston continued his good work with the **Services Portfolio** (sewerage, water & electricity). His primary responsibilities included:

- the continual monitoring of water quality, both domestic water from Wilderness Water Treatment Works, and the general condition of water in the Touw River.
- Follow up on low water pressure reports.
- Follow up on poor progress in Sands Road, achieving the promise that work would be completed before the December holidays.
- Follow up on unplanned electrical outages in Constantia Kloof, Wilderness Heights and other areas.
- Attending a presentation by Geoff Thom of Stellenbosch University, at SANparks, on the hydrological survey for the estuaries of Swartvlei & the Touw River.

Pearce has also 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.

Business & Tourism headed by Pieter Naudé, supported by Inez Jamieson and Neville Ewing.

Introduction The dominant business activity within Wilderness is Tourism. We can therefore confidently state that the economy of Wilderness is largely, if not totally, dependent on a vibrant and sustainable tourism industry. If we focus and address tourism issues, we indirectly address the business issues of Wilderness.

Our Vision is to facilitate the development of Wilderness into the favourite tourism destination along the Garden Route, to the mutual benefit of all stakeholders

Going Forward The potential of the “Wilderness Brand” is economically too important for us not to be pro-active and do whatever is necessary to protect and further develop it into a unique brand.

- It is imperative that Wilderness takes control of its tourism destiny, including brand identity and control over marketing.
- It is imperative that we embark on a Wilderness Improvement Program in support of the brand and supporting marketing plan.

Both of these initiatives were tackled in parallel during the course of this year.

- A Tourism Workshop for Wilderness, facilitated by Councillor Leon van Wyk and George Municipality, was held in August of this year. It was well attended and enthusiastically supported by a wide spectrum of stakeholders in the tourism sector, including several members of WRRRA. It promised to get the ball rolling with the appointment of a sub-committee and an agreed action plan. Sadly, this well intentioned initiative has fallen victim to what I would like to refer to as “Policy & Politics” and we have not moved beyond the outcome of the workshop.
- After a lengthy process of research, evaluation and consultation with experts in District Improvement Programs (DIP), we have drafted an initial intervention program that outlines the needs of and a plan to improve the Wilderness Village – starting with the Wilderness Wall Project. The first part of this project – to clean the wall behind the Caltex Garage - was successfully completed on Friday 4th November. A policy to regulate the future placement of signs, supported by a tariff structure, will be drawn up in consultation with local interested parties by the end of February 2012, at which time the wall will be painted with a large-scale map showing the locations of various attractions.
- The next project to upgrade the Caltex Garage Area and Forecourt has already been initiated through consultation with the relevant parties which will take some time.

There is a lot of work ahead if we are to halt the gradual decay of our infrastructure, and the consequent loss of tourist attraction. We hope that members will support our efforts to return Wilderness to its rightful place as the jewel in the crown of the Garden Route.

Neville has also been engaged in keeping tabs on the progress of the Friends of the **Choo-Tjoe**,

and their project to reopen part of the line using a refurbished inspection van. Unfortunately, Transnet remain intransigent, and therefore little progress has been made in transferring assets to the Provincial Government.

Inez Jamieson and Neville Ewing championed the **Environmental and SANParks Portfolio**. There has been a good working relationship between WRRRA and the SANParks staff, and we have continued to work on that. Jill Bunding-Venter was always willing to listen and do what she could to rectify problems encountered. We wish her well with her promotion and welcome Zwani who has replaced her in the Wilderness section. The main problem encountered has been closure of part of the Kingfisher trail leading to the waterfall. This problem is still not resolved and is in the hands of the attorneys. The work done on the Serpentine channel and the clearing of the Hoekwil bridge has alleviated the flooding problem especially in Wilderness East, although there still was flooding lower down. Working for Water has done major clearing of Maderia Vine and Spanish reed. They have started on a project to clear the Touw River of all aliens, and are working from Touwsrante down to the mouth. We are still trying to motivate some action against the cactus that is becoming a major problem.

The **Traffic, Roads & Pavements** Portfolio under the stewardship of Richard Ledger, has had its fair share of frustrations. Potholes have been filled fairly regularly, although even here shortages in supply of bitumen have sometimes caused delays in this most basic of essential services. Many promises of action remain unfulfilled, including: resurfacing of the Ebb & Flow road/rail bridge; repairing wash ways along White's Road; fixing areas of subsidence along the Heights Road, and the very serious collapse/wash away on Saasveld Road. Other unfulfilled promises of action include: fixing drainage problems at the eastern end of South Street (see N2 report below); re-paving damaged areas of sidewalk in the village, and repairing paved road damage at the intersection of 1st and 2nd Avenues in Wilderness East. The most common excuse provided was "a lack of budget for Wilderness", although the same budget constraints do not seem to apply to the town of George itself. This highlights the disparity in Service Delivery priorities of Council, and our need to implement our own Wilderness Improvement Program.

Sue Ledger continued her efforts with SANRAL on the **N2 Highway Portfolio** with some of the following primary issues being handled:

- Storm water from the N2 is drained south and channelled all the way from 8th Ave to the eastern end of South Street, which has the potential to cause serious problems for residents. Sue reported this to SANRAL who said they would speak to George Municipality. According to Richard Ledger, the Municipality has done little to alleviate the problem, so we await a downpour.
- Kaaimans wall arrows coming down the pass were finally replaced with the correct size, and at the correct height and angle of presentation.
- Requested SANRAL to maintain the pot plants on the centre islands on the N2 west of the lagoon bridge.
- The Caltex/Serpentine N2 junction. We know robots are not an option at this junction, nor is WRRRA paying for a traffic circle, as suggested by SANRAL. In October, Sue therefore submitted a detailed diagram and description of all the lanes and travel lines through the junction to SANRAL. When in print it is very evident what a recipe for disaster it is. Sue is hopeful her successor will continue with the project.
- There are complaints about the wooden poles on the N2 east of Serpentine Road inhibiting vision eastwards. Sue reported the problem to SANRAL, suggesting they be cut down to approx 60cm, which is the height of a standard steel barrier as per North St./N2 junction.

- SANRAL has been requested to erect signs at the East and West approaches to Wilderness, similar to those in Knysna, instructing trucks to gear down rather than use noisy braking systems.
- Some considerable success has been achieved by the fact that SANRAL is to sell the land adjacent to the RAMSAR wetlands site at Island Lake, back to private ownership. Effectively this means the proposed alternative route for the N2 highway will not be built. Unfortunately the road is still not off the statute book and is still, as far as can be ascertained, routed across Wilderness Heights.

Richard and Sue are both standing down from the Committee, so I take this opportunity to thank them both for all the hard work they have put in over a number of years, and for the significant successes they have achieved, despite having to battle through a few frustrations.

Second prize in the frustration stakes goes to the **Safety and Security Portfolio**, headed by Hugh Pharoah, who reports that this year has been characterized by non-activity by the authorities. In part this has been because of position shuffling in the municipality, and as such nobody is willing to accept responsibility when it comes to complaints. The shortage of qualified staff and unfilled permanent positions in George safety and security division has also played a major role in the lack of delivery. The encouraging part has been the overall drop in the crime rate recently. Police have had successes in the last two months and we hope that this trend continues. Our area, with the exception of Wilderness Heights, has gone quiet. This does not however mean that we should drop our guard. Locked houses and protection of our own property are still very much the order of the day. All homeowners are therefore once again reminded to ensure that your properties are properly secured, and to be extra vigilant over the holiday season. Monthly Neighbourhood Watch meetings are held on the last Monday of every month at 17h00 at the Fairy Knowe Hotel.

Sylvia Sell continued to manage the **Communications and Liaison Portfolio** with her customary flair and efficiency. On top of her Secretarial responsibilities, which are themselves quite challenging, writing and distributing a monthly electronic newsletter within a few days of our monthly Executive Committee meetings is another challenge Sylvia accepted every month. Together with having to meet publishing deadlines for local newspapers, Sylvia has handled an enormous workload for the last seven years and, for this reason, has decided to give up the Secretarial and Administration Portfolios to focus purely on the Communications and Liaison facets of the Association. I would like to thank Sylvia for all the hard secretarial and administrative work she has done on my behalf. Sylvia, in her new capacity, will remain on the committee as a seconded member. Sylvia would also like to thank Judith Chilton for her assistance with taking minutes at our Executive Committee Meetings.

Pierre Bovet remained in charge of the **Treasury** of the Association for 2011 and he will provide, albeit his last, Financial Report separately at the AGM. Pierre has also served on the WRRRA Committee for many years, as well as serving as Treasurer for St. Aidens' Church, and being involved in the Neighbourhood Watch. Pierre has now decided that it is time to take a break, so again I would like to thank him on my own behalf, and on behalf of all past chairmen for his dedication to the task over so many years.

Colleen Simons kept us updated on **Community Development** issues in Kleinkrantz, and has engaged with us on the rumoured intention of the Municipality to move Touwsranten informal settlers to the Kleinkrantz informal settlement. We have been unable to tie Council down to either confirm or deny this rumour, so we will be watching the situation very closely. Any such move will fly directly in the face of National Government directives not to entrench unsustainable informal communities, such as the one in Kleinkrantz. It is also senseless, as the present community is already living within the hazardous borders of the Kleinkrantz sewage plant. Colleen is also active in promoting self-help projects such as the Kleinkrantz vegetable

garden, and also in ensuring that local residents have preference for any jobs created by Municipal activity in Kleinkrantz.

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. Once again, it has been vital to have strong community participation in local government affairs, so I would also like to thank you, our members, for your continued active support and encouragement. Long may WRRRA continue to grow from strength to strength.

Graham Sell
Chairman