

Annual Report 2012

Overview

The Association is very fortunate to have had such a strong committee in place because this year has been a rollercoaster, with a number of high and low points that we have had to cope with. On the high side, Pieter Naude has worked very hard to draft and facilitate the Wilderness Improvement Programme (WIP), ably supported on the implementation side by Paul Nicholas. I hope you have all seen the “Wilderness Wall” project, which is the first practical example of our efforts to clean up the entrance to our village. This project kick-started a number of private initiatives, such as the business collective that replaced the low fence vagrants “perch” with flower beds at the Caltex garage. Our village Post Office also joined the improvement effort by replacing the rusty old post-boxes with their latest generation boxes, of which I believe we are the first installation. Frida Rabie of Cocomo’s Restaurant sponsored the repainting of the pedestrian tunnel at the Caltex garage that leads to the beach under the N2, and Massimo Mariotti and his partners in Salinas Restaurant have been the primary sponsors for achieving ‘Blue Flag’ status for a stretch of Wilderness beach in front of the NSRI, which will be a major attraction for visitors. These projects represent a small sampling of the work that still needs to be done, but as Pieter Naude is fond of saying, “we need to eat this elephant one snack at a time”. More detailed information on proposed projects can be seen on our website. Having a clean and neat village and Blue Flag beach status, not only benefits all of us from an aesthetic point of view, but should also not be underestimated from an investment protection perspective. Some may bemoan the influx of tourists during holiday seasons, but some visitors may decide to buy a home here, and a buoyant property market will be instrumental in protecting the investment value of all our homes.

While WIP has taken a lot of the limelight during the year, a lot of hard work has been done across all portfolios, each facing their own challenges in the fight to keep Wilderness a sustainable and vibrant village community. Individual portfolio feedback reports are as follows:

Town Planning Portfolio (John Callanan assisted by Marie Callanan & Graham Sell)

This has once again been a busy year and I would like to thank Graham and Marie for their continued support and assistance. I have not counted the actual number of applications to which we have responded. Suffice to say that we have once again received numerous applications during the past year for comment. As it is imperative that we maintain an even handed approach, each application is thoroughly evaluated and judged on its merits before we submit our response to Council, and we have done our best to ensure consistency in this regard. It is also important to note that whenever we support an application for a relaxation we invariably add a rider to the effect that we reserve the right to consider and back any objections lodged with Council by other interested parties. We have invoked this right during the year and, after thorough evaluation of other objections lodged, have submitted a follow up supporting letter to Council. We have also, wherever applicable, sought to work in tandem with other like minded groups in co-ordinating objections to environmentally undesirable applications. In one such instance the owner withdrew his application because of the numerous objections lodged.

There is an ongoing trend relating to owners building without obtaining prior approval. We are happy to report that Council has instituted legal proceeding in a number of these instances. There have also been occasions when Council has overridden our objections. In instances where Provincial authorities have final approval, we have submitted a further letter of objection to Province, and are happy to report that some of these decisions by Council have subsequently been overturned. It is successes such as this that keep one motivated.

The Planning Portfolio members have met with Stiaan Carstens, the Deputy Director, Planning, throughout the year to discuss matters of mutual concern. Minutes of these meetings are kept

and circulated to the participants to facilitate follow up. In general these meetings are conducted in a constructive manner, and have proved to be very useful.

Tourism & Business Signage Portfolios (Paul Nicholas)

Tourism There has been very little happening because it appears that George Tourism shows very little interest in Wilderness Tourism. This can be seen in the decals displayed in the Wilderness office which read WE LOVE GEORGE. No accommodation can be sold nor any postcards, etc because the staff are not qualified municipal cashiers. The municipality also allowed the office to be moved from its sunny space in the Milkwood Village to a dingy, dark place elsewhere in Milkwood Village, which resulted in the staff becoming demoralised and demotivated. Fortunately, the Tourism Office has been re-located to a vacant office in the Wilderness House complex, which will make it more visible and hopefully more accessible to passing tourists.

There appears to be some sentiment among certain George councillors to try and re-establish a WETA style tourism office in Wilderness, and the Association will endeavour to be involved with any developments in the future.

Wilderness has been awarded Blue Flag beach status for the months of December and January in the area from the Touw River mouth to the NSRI building. A lot of work has been carried out to ensure we received the award, and a lot more work had to be done before the final inspection, which was carried out on the 14 November. The ceremonial raising of the flag by the Mayor of Eden District Council took place on the 15 November at Salinas Restaurant.

Business Signage Unfortunately nothing has happened regarding removing the illegal brown signs in the CBD area. I have been sent from pillar to post and even resorted to asking our Ward Councillor for help but still no success. Nevertheless, we will continue to pursue this matter until resolved. The advertising on the wall behind the Caltex garage has gone very well. There are only a few signs still to be erected and the wall will then be complete. All the proceeds from the sale of space on the wall will be used in support of the WIP.

Rail Reserve Portfolio (Phillip Parsons & Neville Ewing)

2012 has been an incredibly frustrating year with no progress being made in terms of resurrecting the steam service between Knysna and George, or, if the line is abandoned, establishing a world-class Cycleway on the rail reserve. Only in recent weeks has Transnet initiated a process of consultation with local authorities and the business community with a view to exploring commercial and passenger services on the line. For this to happen there will need to be considerable investment in repairing the damaged line and establishing a financially viable range of services, and most of this investment will have to come from the local authorities and from the business community. The consultation is going to be a slow process, and Transnet do not envisage much progress within the next twelve months. The only good news has been that Transnet have undertaken the removal of alien vegetation along the line.

Municipal Services Portfolio (Pearce Johnston)

We have continued to maintain a good relationship with all municipal departments during 2012.

Electricity All planned events affecting the power supply in Wilderness have been conveyed to us and we have been given fair notice of outages caused by maintenance, including the development of the 132kV power line upgrade from Blanco to Knysna. This Eskom upgrade may still affect us for the next 6 to 12 months.

There have been a number of unplanned events that have been satisfactorily explained. The outages in Constantia Kloof, for example, are as a result of interference due to trees etc. causing faults on the overhead line which supplies the area. The department are trying to ensure that branches of trees and vegetation are cut back before they cause problems.

In the case of the 11kV overhead line in Wilderness East, hardening of the copper conductors causes frequent breakages resulting in loss of power to certain parts of Wilderness East. The department has included an amount of funding in their budget to replace the affected conductors in the near future.

Civil & Technical We have been kept informed on a regular basis of the quality of the drinking water from the Wilderness Water Treatment Works at Ebb & Flow. There was some concern regarding the condition of the water in the Touw River and Wilderness Lagoon earlier in the year. However after meeting with all stakeholders, which included the Association, Civil & Technical Department (who carry out regular tests) and SANparks, it was agreed that a closer watch on the water would be maintained. This has been carried out reasonably well. However, over the last 2 months we have had to remind the lab of their promise to keep us informed. There has been some discussion on the source of pollution of the river and lagoon, and some hold the view that the informal settlement at Touwsranteen may be the source. We will continue to keep a watching brief on this problem.

Refuse Removal This is a service that we can generally rely upon. Recently, however, Environmental Department appointed a new contractor for the collection of recyclable waste, and there has been some confusion as to the days on which these collections should take place. After considerable correspondence between ourselves and the department, we believe that these problems have been resolved. We will continue to monitor this service.

Conclusion We have reasonably well organised service providers, and we should continue to encourage the departments involved.

Environmental Portfolio (Neville Ewing)

WRRRA assisted in the clearing of vines and undergrowth that was choking the aloes at the Wilderness Station. This is an on-going project, although if done more regularly, it is less of a task. Many residents have been approached regarding aliens and weeds on their properties. The response from residents has been overwhelming, so a big thank-you to those who responded so positively. However, there is still much Madeira Vine and Cactus that needs tackling.

Liaison with SANParks has been maintained where common issues such as repairs to boardwalks, steps to the beaches etc are discussed. WRRRA has sponsored a rubbish bin at a popular fishing spot along the Pied Kingfisher Trail.

More recently, the establishment of the Garden Route National Park Forum has been established but the participation by most stakeholders is disappointing. We are using this forum to leverage our relationship with SANParks, especially where incidents such as pollution have consequences for locals and tourism.

Traffic, Roads, Pavements & Road Signage Portfolio (Hugh Pharoah)

I have been unable to play a proactive role as at every turn I have been greeted with the fact that there are no funds available. Achievements this year have been limited to the painting of the centre line down Whites Road, and the filling of potholes in Wilderness East off the N2 going to 8th Avenue. One positive aspect has been the communication with contractors working on the Kaaimans Bridge project. Regular progress reports have been provided, and the Association has congratulated them on the courtesy of their workers, the general tidiness of the site, and their ability to keep two-way traffic flow for the duration of the project.

Safety & Security Portfolio and Neighbourhood Watch (Hugh Pharoah)

Safety & Security Municipal law enforcement across the whole of George is virtually nonexistent, with the single exception of speed detection by camera. It appears that virtually all Law Enforcement Officers have been transferred to the Camera Division and are engaged in this single activity. On challenging a Traffic Officer at a recent CPF meeting regarding their propensity for hiding in the bushes, the answer was that it is perfectly legal for them to do this. I followed up with a visit to the head traffic officer where I made a plea for more visible traffic policing and less hiding, also pointing out that their habits are leading to destruction of plant life in their hiding places, not to mention the litter they so carelessly leave behind.

Neighbourhood Watch This has been a success story as the numbers have grown considerably. I have a very good rapport with our local Station Commander, WO Boshoff, and he keeps me very well informed of progress. Unfortunately much of what he tells me is not for immediate dissemination as a lot of it is progress and work in action. But it does mean that when individuals phone me, I can give them an up to date report. I can also say that some very good arrests have been made, but a lot of crime is being attributed to syndicates, with some members still on the run.

Communication, Liaison & Website (Sylvia Sell & Graham Sell)

Monthly newsletters have been sent to all our members who have email facilities, and quarterly composite newsletters have been sent to postal members. Monthly press releases have also been regularly published by local newspapers, our website has been upgraded to the latest security levels, and members can now access the latest Valuation Rolls for Wilderness, Wilderness Heights and Kleinkrantz. The data is the latest available from the Municipality, but obviously will need to be updated once the Valuations Appeal Board has adjudicated the objections. We have also made WIP presentation material available for general download from the website. A new innovation has been the establishment of a WRRRA network on the national Turn It Around crime reporting website. Registration is free, and Members who register with our network are able to report crimes and suspicious activity, which are then immediately distributed to all other registered members. Information distribution is via email and/or SMS so, if you have not already done so, we urge you to make use of this free service to be continually advised of potential risks in your area.

Community Projects (Phillip Parsons)

WRRRA took action earlier in the year to address the shocking condition of the ablution facilities at Touwsrante Primary School. Unfortunately, as a number of Departments are involved, the process has been slow, and to date no repairs have been effected. Nevertheless we have been promised that they will be completed within this financial year.

Municipal Finances Portfolio (Graham Sell)

2012/13 Budget The state of Municipal finances remains a cause for serious concern. Salaries and benefits for Councillors and Municipal Officials continue to be a major point of contention, and bad debts are a long way above acceptable levels. There is very little sign that Council can find its way out of the current financial debt mire, caused by previous political mismanagement, without drastically increasing tariffs while at the same time reducing service delivery levels. We have already experienced an example of this with the removal of the free 20kWh of electricity, which resulted in an effective increase in the electricity tariff above that approved by NERSA for Municipalities. There will no doubt be more of the same in store for us, and we are anticipating that that an attempt will be made to remove the free 6kl water allowance in the 2013/14 budget year.

Special Ratings Area Service delivery levels will not improve in the near future, so the perception that we are paying more and more for less and less will become further entrenched. Some residents have already called for us to withhold Municipal account payments, and rather pay the money into an escrow account that will be used to buy services that are inadequately, or ineffectively, provided by the Municipality. We do not consider this to be a viable option, as basic service delivery does exist at all levels. Potholes may not be fixed quickly enough or professionally, and the electricity supply may be interrupted more frequently than we like, but the fact remains that the services are provided. It is also important that the Municipality's finances are not put under any more stress than they already are. A complete collapse of system due to a further reduced income stream is not an outcome that any of us should wish for. However, we have been lobbying our Councillor for some time to reintroduce the additional rebate we used to enjoy due to our lesser Public Service Infrastructure in comparison to George. While this would marginally lessen the financial burden on homeowners, it will certainly not improve service delivery, so our further suggestion is for the Municipality to then charge an additional rate, equivalent to the amount of the rebate, that would be set aside specifically for use in Wilderness. In other words, we will continue paying exactly the same amount as before, but by structuring the payment as part normal and part "Special Ratings Area" we will ensure that the funds collected under the special rate are kept solely for use in Wilderness. To achieve this outcome we will need the support of the majority of residents, so it is even more imperative that all residents are encouraged to become members of the Association.

General Property Revaluation The incompetence of the appointed valuers to fulfil their contracted mandate, council's intransigence in admitting same, and the failure of the authorities to appoint the Valuations Appeal Board in a timely manner, has been the source of great frustration. Unfortunately, it is Municipal legislation itself that forces Councils to "fudge" the numbers in the first place, and then reinforces their ongoing denial of any wrongdoing. The annual budget must be approved in Council by 31st May every year, or the Municipality faces the prospect of being placed under administration. Yet they can only finalise the budget and set new tariffs for rates when the Valuation Roll is finalised, or is at least 90% of the way to finality. If they get it wrong, as did George Municipality in 2007 and 2011, doing it again is not an option as they would miss the budget approval deadline. The resulting "Mexican stand-off" where we know they are wrong, but they cannot admit they are wrong, jeopardises our ability to communicate positively with Council on other important ongoing issues. However, we will continue to support your individual objections, and trust that the Appeal Board, when finally convened, maintains objectivity in its decision processes. We will also engage with Council in an effort to avoid a further repetition of this fundamentally unacceptable situation in 2015, when the next General Property Revaluation is required to be done.

Treasury & Administration Portfolios (Niel Viljoen & Vanessa Hau-Yoon)

All-in-all our two “newbies” managed their challenging responsibilities admirably. Vanessa has very successfully navigated her way through her first year as Secretary of the Association. Producing the minutes of our meetings in a timely and accurate way is a challenge that she has risen to and, in addition, Vanessa also managed to produce the requisite press releases while Sylvia was on vacation.

Niel has tackled his first year as Treasurer with equanimity, even though we faced some initially frustrating challenges in converting the Association to an on-line banking platform. Taking on the challenge of managing the Association’s membership database was also met calmly, with a dash of humour thrown in.

The Association closed the financial year with funds totalling R 84 901, an increase of R 26 945 on the balance at the beginning of the year. This was mainly due to the Wall Project that contributed R 12 377 and an increase in the income from subs of R 4005. The surplus of the Wall project will be available to further upgrade and beautify the village.

On the expenditure side, legal fees that were incurred to compel the Liquor Board to follow proper procedure, and supply the reasons why it granted the licence to Wilderness Liquors, totalled R21 952. We were able to recover R20 000 in a negotiated settlement with the State’s Attorney, and the Association did obtain the reasons. The significantly higher cost of meetings was attributable to the 40th anniversary celebration cocktail party held after the AGM last year. This expenditure item will return to normal levels. The Annual Financial Statements are appended.

Conclusion

Once again, my sincere thanks to the entire Executive Committee who worked so diligently and competently with no financial incentives. This is the strongest group that I have had the pleasure to work with, as they are all passionate about Wilderness. My special thanks to Pieter Naudé who, as Deputy Chairman, gave me much needed support during some of the more trying times, and also to Sylvia, not only my lighthouse, but also my handbrake. Most of all, I would like to thank you, our members, for your continuing support, and for the many messages of encouragement that we received from you throughout the year. As you now know, Sylvia and I have completed our latest term of office, and after eight years and six years of service respectively, we have decided that the time has come for us to retire – again! We wish the 2013 Executive Committee every success, and will continue to provide them with support, as we encourage you all to continue doing.

Graham Sell
Chairman