

Poor roads threaten Lowveld's tourism

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MBOMBELA - Poor roads are ruining the Lowveld's economy. Businessman and KLCBT president Oupa Pilane, condemned the provincial government publicly this week for failing to maintain infrastructure.

"Poor road conditions and its affect on tourism is not being taken seriously," he said, and added that despite the protests that recently forced the Lowveld to it knees, the province's roads, especially the Panorama Route which is the jewel of tourism in the province, is being neglected. "Without addressing the infrastructure, no potential for growth can be unlocked," he said.

"This is not only one of the most popular tourist routes in Mpumalanga, it is also home to thousands of youth who are employed at various establishments along the route. It had the potential to create even more desperately needed jobs, especially for the youth in our province. It is a

low-hanging fruit that can be maximised to create new and inclusive enterprises that will see more of our previously disadvantaged people taking an active role in the tourism industry.

"However, despite its potential to create thousands of jobs, the route is one of the most neglected. Tourists do not want to come to the region because of these road conditions and those who are employed fear losing their jobs as the businesses they work for lose income as a result," Pilane explained.

The KLCBT has engaged government numerous times on this issue, especially the departments of economic development and tourism and public works, roads and transport (DPWRT).

"Our requests have fallen on deaf ears. Minor sub-standard interventions were attended to but due to the poor quality of work, the roads have become even more dangerous than they were before. We continue to receive negative feedback

from visitors - both domestic and international - about the conditions of our roads," he said.

Many bicycle and motorsport events have been cancelled or put on hold due to the roads, which is also having a detrimental effect on job creation in the area.

"Our province's reputation as the country's inland tourism destination of choice is being jeopardised by the inability of the Mpumalanga Provincial Government to play their part. This has to be corrected," Pilane stressed.

"We cannot do this alone, and therefore urgently request the Mpumalanga Provincial Government to step up and partner with us to create a shared vision that will see our province grow and flourish and not stagnate," Pilane concluded.

The DPWRT was approached for comment, but by the time of going to press, had not responded.

Continued on page 2

Protests cause a loss for all

Continued from page 1

The business chamber added that service-delivery protests against government were another serious hindrance to the area's tourism. Last week, protests around the Kruger National Park reached boiling point, and even though it was resolved, permanent stability has become nonnegotiable.

Linda Grimbeek of the KLCBT, explained that 1,8 million people visit the park annually. "A recent study showed that the majority of tourists who visit the Lowveld also visit the park. Thus being confronted by violent protests like that of last week, not only affects the image of the Lowveld, but the whole country.

"Inevitably, pictures are spread on social media and spread like wildfire, leading to a string of cancellations. Ultimately we face the risk of completely being cut out of tourists' itinerary, which will take years to fix," said Grimbeek.

"The Lowveld generates about 50 per cent of the province's income, which can mainly be attributed to tourism. So if it wasn't for the Kruger, we would have been in dire straits a long time ago," said Grimbeek.

Kruger, Phabeni and Numbi gates were inaccessible due to service-delivery protests that got out of hand on the R536 and R538 last week. After a few days of chaos, loss of income among various tourism establishments and many tourists vowing to never return to SA, the police swept through the area on Tuesday, and in the process arrested 23 protesters for public violence.

According to Joseph Mabuza, spokesman for the Department of Safety, Security and Liaison, the community members were protesting due to non-availability of water.

"MEC Pat Ngomane visited the community members with the provincial commissioner and called municipality

officials to join them and Rand Water ascertained the extent of the problem. It was found that some water pipes were leaking due to illegal connections hence some villages' taps ran dry," Mabuza said.

He added that besides the water issues, some community members were accused of robbery, and were brought to book.

After the protesters had dispersed, the City of Mbombela launched a clean-up and next week, Ngomane has arranged a meeting with local stakeholders to ensure that stability is brought to the area.

The KLCBT, who applauded the stakeholders that assisted in bringing calm to the situation, said that Mpumalanga Department of Economic Development vowed to start a media campaign to inform the communities adjacent to the park on the correct ways to voice their anger.

"This will hopefully discourage them from taking to the streets and causing havoc among tourists," said Grimbeek.

"Our biggest challenge is determining issues prior to community members taking to the streets. We are therefore, grateful towards the department,

and we are sure that it might be a solution," she added.

Stakeholders will also meet with youth organisations to spread the message that protest action also negatively affects their own community. "Most people working in those areas are also dependent, which ultimately results in a lose-lose situation."

The KLCBT suggests that communication is the the solution. "The community should be given platforms where they can talk about their problems. And when they do so, the government should listen and help them find a solution, instead of waiting for the issues to blow over," said Grimbeek.

She added that the police should act earlier when signs of protests arise, instead of waiting for the situation to get out of hand.



Oupa Pilane.