

ADDRESS BY THE MEC FOR FINANCE, ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT AND TOURISM, MR PAT NGOMANE, MPL, ON THE OCASSION OF THE LAUNCH OF THE PILGRIMS' REST REVITALISATION PROJECT, THABA CHWEU LOCAL MUNICIPALITY

Thursday, 05 December 2019

Programme Director, Mr Johannes Nobunga – who is also the CEO of the MTPA;

Executive Mayor of the host municipality – Thaba Chweu Local Municipality – Her Worship, Councillor Fridah Nkadimeng (let me explain that in terms of Protocol, the host is acknowledged first; hence the local Mayor is acknowledged before the District one);

Executive Mayor of the Ehlanzeni District Municipality, Her Worship, Councillor Jesta Sidell;

Chairperson of the MTPA Board, Mr Thulani Nzima;

Other MTPA Board Members present;

Newly-appointed Head of Economic Development and Tourism, Mr Sarel Mtsweni;

Representative of our sister Department of Culture, Sport and Recreation;

Tourism business operators;

Our golfers and aspiring ones, who participated during the kick-off of this launch, earlier this morning;

Members of the Media;

Distinguished Guests;

Ladies and Gentlemen.

Good Evening! San'bonani!

1. In the words of French novelist, Gustav Flaubert, and I quote:
“Travel makes one modest. You see what a tiny place you occupy in the world”, unquote.

2. Indeed, when we travel and tour, we become exposed to many other things we never knew before; we thus become much wiser.

Programme Director;

3. When I assumed office in June earlier this year, I was mandated to, amongst others, **ensure *Economic Transformation and Job Creation*** in the Province.

4. The quotation by Gustav Flaubert is thus relevant for my talk, as it speaks to my mandate, given that I am also responsible for tourism growth activities in the Province.

5. This is because **tourism remains a critical sector for economic growth, economic transformation and job creation** in our Province. It is one sector that is resistant from economic decline; hence we **must continue to nurture** it to produce more jobs for our people.

6. It has been proven that this sector continues to grow rapidly, when other sectors of the economy are on a decline. Accordingly, **when the number of people visiting our Province declines, we must be worried**; we must introspect to check what could be the cause.
7. We must ask ourselves, **whether are we doing enough, to keep our tourism attractions, attractive to tourists?**
8. That is why I am excited that we are, this evening, commencing on a long journey to revitalise our tourism product offerings and attractions.
9. **Pilgrims' Rest** is one such jewel, and a tourism attraction in our Province, given its uniqueness and rich history, as a mining town. The history of the town's gold fields date back to ancient times, when early Iron Age communities worked the quartz reefs for gold.
10. No one can, thus, dispute that this area is **richly imbued with a diversity of natural, cultural and historic gems**. The uniqueness of this historic village – which was declared a National Monument in 1986 – is vividly evident in its museums and historic sites.

11. Pilgrims' Rest has a rare and potentially highly profitable array of established heritage assets, scenic natural sites, and political and industrial histories, which must be preserved for posterity.
12. It is incumbent upon us, therefore, **to revitalise the town in order to continue to attract more tourists** to the Province. We must continue to capitalise on its well preserved historical infrastructure, as one of the original gold mining towns in South Africa, and to this day, it still has a rich gold panning tradition.
13. To show our commitment towards growing tourist numbers in this historic heritage town, we have accordingly, **commenced with the rejuvenation project**, which was informed by a comprehensive study.
14. In this regard, during the current financial year (2019/2020), we have, through the MTPA, planned to revitalise the town, and the following few quick wins were identified for implementation, as per the results of the feasibility study:
 - (a) **We will clean and beautify the town through landscaping;**
 - (b) **We will re-design and upgrade signage within the town to increase visibility of the places of interest such as restaurants, bars, and museums;**

(c) We will initiate young creative local tourism programmes such as craft, performance, and guided tours to facilitate the re-branding of the site as a dynamic local tourism product.

15. These are some of the many interventions we have planned, to revitalise the town, which we hope will bring back the high number of tourists, to this once much popular tourism attraction.
16. We are further delighted that the **occupancy level of business premises in this town has improved drastically, as 24 of the 32 business premises** are occupied and operating – thanks to our sister **Department of Public Works, Roads and Transport**.
17. These businesses have signed **lease agreements of nine (9) years, eleven (11) months** with the Department of Public Works, Roads and Transport, as part of the revitalisation programme.
18. We are confident that the remaining vacant premises, and the caravan park, will be occupied very soon, as **eight (8) guest houses have already undergone major renovations**.
19. We are also in the process of **revamping the electricity network to Eskom standards**, albeit tight financial resources.

20. Further working with our sister **Department of Culture, Sport and Recreation (*the dcsr*)**, we are in the process of **enhancing visitor's experience at all our museums, including here in Pilgrim's Rest.**
21. Currently, the Department is on Phase 1 of **upgrading the Diggings Site Museum**, as it is one of the popular draw cards for Pilgrim's Rest Village – famously known as the birth place of the South African Gold Mining Industry.
22. In addition, with the help of other stakeholders, such as the Friends of Pilgrim's Rest Museum, **we have installed QR Codes in all the buildings** in the main street. These QR codes provide historical information such as, when was the building built; and is occupied by whom. This will provide visitors access to information on the historic buildings at all times and at no cost to them.
23. As an extension of this technological aid to provide better service delivery to visitors, *the dcsr* is also in the process of acquiring **Wi-Fi, Website and a Smartphone App**, which will contribute towards enhancing visitor's experience, through a project termed, '**History-meets-Technology**'.

24. We are also excited that *the dcsr* and the South Africa Gold Panning Association have **submitted a bid to host the 2023 World Gold Panning Competition right here in Pilgrim's Rest.**

25. We are positive and hopeful that we will win the bid, which will bring more than 21 member countries around the world, to our beautiful Province. This will boost local tourism tremendously, and propel economic growth.

26. All I can say is, Pilgrim's Rest will never be the same again, once it is fully rejuvenated. We are intervening to restore the town to its former glory. Watch the space!

Ladies and gentlemen;

27. As I close, we have now entered the Festive Season, and it is during this time, when we will receive a large number of visitors to our Province. I thus urge you to **exploit this period of business boom to grow your businesses**, and our economy in general.

28. As tourism business operators, you are, in fact, our tourism Ambassadors – in order words, you represent our economic growth interests. Your actions, can make or break our forever booming industry.

29. I therefore implore you **to sell and represent us well**; because by **providing an excellent service to our visitors**, they will surely come back for more, to enjoy our tourism product offerings.
30. Give them the **best ever customer experience** which will remain engraved in their minds. I can guarantee you that, **no arrogant business person, who disrespects their customer, has ever succeeded** – I bet with my life on this one.
31. Borrowing the words of the founder of Walmart stores, American businessman and entrepreneur, Samuel Moore, and I quote:
- “There is only one boss [in any business. It is] the customer – and he can fire everybody in the company, from the chairman on down, simply by spending his money somewhere else”***, unquote.
32. Therefore, always remember that **a customer is always right**; they are the kings and queens who sustain your businesses, and our tourism industry.
33. When your customers are over-the-moon, about your world-class customer care and service, I can assure you that **they will spread a good word about us**, when they go back to their respective places. Trust me on this one!

34. Before I retire from the podium, let me take this opportunity to wish you and your loved ones, a **Merry Christmas, and a prosperous 2020.**
35. Travel safely during this hectic period, and come back rejuvenated to travel with us, as we **endeavour to transform our economy for faster job creation.**
36. ***“Tourism and Jobs: A Better Future for All”***
37. ***Let’s grow the tourism sector of Mpumalanga together,*** because tourism creates jobs.
38. **Ngiyabonga!**