

## **Tourism's chronology of events**

Appointed as of 1 November 2017, one of the primary motivations for my selection was my Tourism and events background. At the outset I had to come to grips with the Swellendam Tourism Organisation (STO) and its functioning. The STO, initially registered as an NPC, had for some time been non-quorate, with only four active members serving on its board as well as that it was without active membership, as a membership institution. It had furthermore also not hosted an AGM in 2017.

My tenure with the municipality began towards the end of a three-year agreement with the STO, which was set to end on 30 June 2018. The Tourism Manager position was coincidentally vacant when I arrived and subsequently advertisements for the vacancy had to be placed in December 2018, as the vacancy needed to be filled until the end of the Municipality's agreement with the STO. The successful candidate was made aware of all of the necessary timelines resulting from the agreement with the Municipality and the STO, as well as that the position was attached to 12-month contract.

At no point was any indication provided to Mr Visser, the appointed Tourism Manager, that the agreement would continue or be re-visited and renewed post December 2018, nor was there any indication provided that Mr Visser's post would be available for employ post December 2018. This was furthermore justified by myself to Mr Visser, in that the municipality was in the process of contemplating its way forward in terms of a new Tourism strategy.

The Tourism Manager and staff were encouraged to continue as per their normal duties, whilst council applied itself to consider the way forward. Simultaneously however, the Jobs Fund was evaluating sustaining a project it had started; Swellendam Tourism Economic Empowerment Project (STEEP). This was due to a number of audit anomalies that came to light which the Jobs Fund had wanted the municipality to intervene with, and to resolve.

In May 2018, I, as the Municipal Manager submitted an item to Council advising that the STO agreement run its course (end of June 2018) and not be renewed, that the STO subsequently be closed and its assets disposed of, or transferred back to the municipality, and that a new process be launched to craft a (new) strategy and way forward for Tourism in Swellendam. Council subsequently approved the notion that the agreement with the STO run its course until the end of June 2018.

In May 2018, a report was presented to the Swellendam Municipal Council to reconstitute the way Tourism is managed in Swellendam. This decision paved the way for the process of redesigning Tourism services and how it functions in Swellendam. It is common knowledge that previous attempts by Tourism Organisations (in whatever form as well as under whosoever's leadership) has not yielded the desired outcomes that the broader industry and sector has expected.

The contracts and services as set up with all individuals working at the STO, has not made mention of 2019, nor do the contracts and agreements suggest that operations will continue in 2019. Therefore, the impression perceived post closing of the STO offices, was that there was no communication and reiteration of this to staff by Mr Visser. As the Municipal Manager, I was not exercising oversight on the day-to-day operations of the STO or its Tourism function.

Subsequently to help carve out this new path for Tourism in Swellendam, the Swellendam Municipality has appointed Destinate (following an open and competitive public process) to help craft this path with us. This path starts with understanding how our consumers, media and tourism sales channels perceive us, it asks tough questions so that we can co-craft a new strategy, with new targets, new ideas and a new plan. The first sessions have been held and feedback has been largely positive. A report is currently out for comment. This is the first of many reports. As stakeholders you are encouraged to engage with the reports, attend the workshops and help craft this new way forward.

Part of developing the new way forward entails being honest with ourselves as tourism role-players and council, regarding the performance of the past. It is generally agreed that Swellendam should be further than it is as a town in terms of tourism. It is also the common perception that the tourism information office was a selectively run operation that was not very effective or efficient.

I think within small towns such as Swellendam, tourism is everybody's business and distributing maps and booklets across the town should be easily accessible to visitors and locals alike. Change is an inevitable part of life. It happens whether we're ready or not. One of the secrets of living is to learn to handle the changes we find coming our way. It is possible to learn to set our sail so that the winds of change blow us in the direction we choose rather than onto the rocks. "Change is inevitable. Growth is optional." — John C. Maxwell.

It is against this backdrop that I wish to advise that this decision to shut down the tourism information function and office as we currently know it, was taken as far back as May 2018 when the item to restructure was tabled and approved at, and by, Council. The last six months has been the finalisation of the last contract. If this does not constitute sufficient notice then I do not know how much additional time is necessary. All of these indicators must surely have demonstrated that we were serious about these changes.

The project we launched with the appointment of Destinate seeks to carve out a new future for tourism in Swellendam. This means trying new and different things that help to secure more visitors to Swellendam. All of which is not possible within the ambit of the current tourism function. It was never intended that the current tourism function would simply continue without disruption.

It is therefore in some respects a sad day as it means that we have to part ways with the old and familiar and to no longer have a physical presence, as we have come to know it. But it is also an exciting day as it means embracing a new tomorrow, an opportunity to start afresh and to try new things and ideas unhindered and unencumbered by the past.

I simply ask that you have faith in the new process and participate and engage as we co-design and co-craft the new future together.

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