

Soweto showcase

BY THOMAS THALE

A showcase project to restore a Soweto dam and the adjacent park has rekindled community spirit among local residents. The upgrading of the neglected Moroka Dam and Thokoza Park, once prime attractions of Rockville, Soweto, is a R20-million mayoral showcase project.

"The community was involved right from the moment of conception," says Lindelani Mathebula, community liaison officer for the upgrade. "This has made local people excited about this project. The mood is one of optimism. This project has really brought Rockville alive."

The ambitious programme includes desilting the dam, removing a large portion of the reeds that have provided cover for criminals, revamping the catchment area of the dam and landscaping the park, replacing alien growth with indigenous trees.

Neville J Smith, Deputy Director, Environmental Policy for the City of Johannesburg, says restoration of this recreational facility will uplift the community by "providing a sense of place".

The dam was created in 1960 by the construction of an earth embankment under Vundla Drive. Some of the older residents of Rockville have fond memories of this period. "This park used to be clean until the 1980s," says Sam Morake, a long-time Rockville resident. "We used to swim here and come here for picnics. This was the main meeting place of socialites from Rockville and the surrounding areas."

For both Morake and Richard Kweyiya, from nearby White City Jabavu, the restoration of the park is an opportunity for the community to rediscover its positive social values.

"Look at those children," Kweyiya says, pointing at a group of young kids playing on the construction site. "Where are their parents? If they get injured, they will turn around and blame the government. Our people must start taking responsibility for their actions. We must take collective responsibility not only for this park but for the wellbeing of these kids."

Morake nods vigorously in agreement.

During years of neglect, the dam and the park itself deteriorated badly. This physical degradation gave rise to moral decay as the park was

taken over by criminal elements.

"It was no longer safe to come to the park," says Eugene Thusi, of Rockville. "Women have been raped here and people mugged by thugs hiding in those long reeds. Cars were also regularly hijacked."

His friend Sike Mkhize agrees. "Security must be provided in this area, especially at night."

The two friends blame poor maintenance in the past for the deterioration of the park. "Only one old man worked here during the day. He

tried his best to keep the park clean, but he could not remove the debris from the dam," Thusi says.

But now "we are excited about this development. The whole community has been galvanised to guard the area."

There is much work to be done. The dam was silted up because the surrounding roads had not been properly surfaced, says resident engineer Cass

Bhamjee.

"A section of the park was also used as an ash dump site. The surrounding roads also had a poor storm water reticulation system, resulting in soil erosion."

Dealing with those problems is high on the agenda – the footpaths running across the parks will be paved – and security also has a high priority.

"We will build curbs on the roads surrounding the park, build humps on all roads to make them safer for children, provide lighting on the park, fix street lights and high masts in the area," Bhamjee says.



"We are excited about
this development."



Included in the project are designated play areas for children, a rehabilitation of the stream edge and construction of access ramps, steps and entrances.

Landscaping is a crucial part of the project. With the removal of alien vegetation through the Working for Water Programme, and replanting of indigenous trees, the existing biodiversity in the area will be enhanced.

“Many of the streams leading into the dam will be naturally shaped and interspersed with rocks,” explains Smith, “creating suitable habitats for riparian vegetation and macro-invertebrates to re-colonise.” The restoration of the dam and surrounding park will result in an overall improvement of water quality in the dam.

Project manager Andre Nel says the restoration of the park will be completed by 10 August. That is well before delegates arrive for the World Summit on Sustainable Development. “We are on track to meet the deadline. Everything is going according to plan,” he says.

In the immediate term, the project has provided about 150 jobs, mostly for locals, and local contractors have also benefitted. “We made sure that jobs go to semi-skilled people from the ward and that we have a fair geographical spread in the allocation of jobs,” says Mandla Ndumo, the ward councillor for the area.

He says the park is earmarked to be one of Soweto’s prime tourist attractions. “We are working on a plan to enable artists to sell their craft from the park. The park will serve not only as a recreational facility but also to generate income for the community.”

Ndumo promises that criminals will find it difficult to operate from the newly revamped park.

“As a member of the Community Policing Forum, I have worked on various projects to rehabilitate criminals. I communicate with Superintendent Ngubeni, the station commander of Moroka Police Station, and he has undertaken to provide visible policing of the park on an ongoing basis.”

The area falls under ward 33, also referred to as Dr Moroka ward, named after Dr James Moroka, the famous former president of the African National Congress who spearheaded the move of the ANC towards militancy in the early 1950s. The name therefore conjures up images of this rich social history.

The Moroka dam looks set to be restored to its pristine condition, and the community to the founding principles of selflessness championed by Dr Moroka.

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Two young Rockville residents watch construction workers rebuilding Moroka Dam.