

REPORT ON THE ACTIVITIES OF THE HISTORIC OAK AVENUE INTEREST GROUP FOR 2017

Reaction to the launching of the Historic Oak Avenue Interest Group in February has exceeded my greatest expectations.

Somehow it seems as if mountains have been moved and in another sense not much has happened. This just confirms that caring for and preserving the oak trees is a lifelong task which cannot be completely accomplished in one year.

When newspaper and television reports appeared in January 2017 on the perilous state of the Oak Avenue, a plan of action to help preserve this Provincial Heritage site had already been drafted by Heritage Potchefstroom Erfenis.

An open meeting was hosted by Erfenis in February inviting interested parties to attend with the purpose to meet with all possible role players to form a viable plan of action. The parties who committed to the project include the Potch-Tlokwe Chamber of Commerce, the Potchefstroom Museum, the Parks Department of the Municipality, property owners with part of the Historic Oak Avenue on their pavement, members of the City Council and various ward committees, academics and officials from various departments of the North-West University, representatives from the Botanical Gardens and the Technical Department of the North-West University and representatives of local and national media.

During this initial meeting three PowerPoint presentations were made. Prof Sarel Cilliers, urban ecologist from the NWU, who previously conducted academic studies on the oak trees, gave information on the state and needs of the trees. Forensic Accountancy students, who counted the trees as one of their projects, presented their findings. I gave a historical background. The meeting resulted in an Interest Group consisting of the numerous role players.

The main purpose of the Interest Group was to make the community aware of the plight and needs of the oak trees.

Since then numerous groups in the community contributed their time and expertise:

1. The Potch-Tlokwe Chamber of Commerce (with Mr. André de Villiers as their dedicated and tireless representative), decided to focus on improving the conditions of the oak trees next to the Bult Shopping Centre.

As part of their initiative a tree was planted across from the Akker Koffiehuis in Steve Biko Avenue on 1 September 2017. Bertus Els of Akker Koffiehuis undertook to engage the car guards on the Bult to water the tree and take care of it. This group of car guards, wearing yellow overalls, forms part of a project to combat crime on the Bult.

In conjunction with Heritage Potchefstroom Erfenis the Chamber of Commerce launched a project to raise funds to buy trees from a nursery in Rustenburg (the supplier of oak trees to the Municipality). The Municipality had a budget available to buy 20 trees. With funds so

raised it was possible to buy a further 10 trees, thus 30 in all. The trees funded by Heritage Potch and the Chamber of Commerce will be planted in the Bult section of the Oak Avenue. It was decided that the trees will only be planted on the pavement of property owners who will undertake to water the trees and take care of them.

Six trees were planted by a property owner in Steve Biko Avenue who undertook to care for the trees.

2. North-West University – various groups:

Numerous groups at the North-West University launched projects:

2.1 The Forensic Accountancy students counted the trees and made a survey on the state of the trees.

2.2 Creative Writing students of Prof Franci Greyling undertook a project to write poems, songs, short stories and even made videos with the Oak Avenue as subject.

2.3 The society of the Social Work students planted trees (not oaks but indigenous trees) on the campus in aid of appreciation and nurturing of trees in the Oak Avenue.

2.4 During the second semester second year students of Karen Puren in Urban and Regional Planning of the North-West University (Potchefstroom) received an assignment in one of their modules, Urban Design, to develop design proposals on how to save the Potchefstroom Oak Avenue. Although the Oak Avenue is planted along a route from the Dam to the Agricultural College, it runs along various streets and comprises of different parts which each has its own unique character and design challenges. Each of the six student groups was assigned a different part of the Oak Avenue. Historical aspects, ecological aspects, opinions of the public and various urban design aspects (e.g. the sense of place, the three-dimensional floorscape and street furniture) had to be considered in the design proposals.

Students had to create a model of the streetscape that they envisage for their assigned part of the Oak Avenue. They also had to present their project to a panel of judges. Apart from five other experts in the field of Planning, Architecture and Engineering, Marnus Botha, committee member of Erfenis, and I were judges.

2.5 Honours students in Journalism at the School of Communication Studies, were assigned to compile various media reports on the Oak Avenue.

2.6 Heritage students of Prof Kobus du Pisani initialised research to create a heritage conservation plan for the Oak Avenue, to be completed in 2018.

3. North-West University – officials:

Mr. Vincent Eastes from the office of Prof Fika van Rensburg facilitated talks between representatives of the Historic Oak Avenue Interest Group and officials of the North-West University. They expressed their willingness to engage in projects to ensure the well-being of the oaks on pavements next to the property of university. It appears that the University is the property owner with the most trees on their pavements, namely 150.

A proposal was made for funding from the University to develop a part of the pavement from the Gerrit Dekker Street entrance of the University southwards. At the time of writing this report the outcome has not yet been made known to me.

4. Engaging Schools:

It was decided that schools who have property next to the Historic Oak Avenue will likewise be requested to become involved in caring for the trees. Subsequently the following schools have been contacted:

- 4.1 Girls High: I had talks with Mrs. Meyer, headmistress, and Mr. Lourens Henning. I was advised to send him an email with information, which I did. I have not had any further reaction from him or the school. This will be followed up in 2018 since a large portion of the pavement next to the school has a tarred surface, placing the trees, which are already under stress in a perilous position.

On 27 November I was contacted by Marcelle Heyman. She is the wife of a teacher at Girls High and they live in one of the hostels. She reacted to the request in the Herald and is willing to “adopt” one or more of the trees next to the school and will also speak to the groundsmen of the school concerning watering the other trees.

- 4.2 President Pretorius Primary School: After an interview with the headmaster, Mr. Jas Fourie, I had the opportunity to present a slide show to all the learners of the school. The school has undertaken to water the trees on their pavement. Their Land Service (Landsdiens) also launched projects concerning the Oak Avenue.
- 4.3 Boys High: I had a discussion with Mr Johan van Vuuren, head master. He undertook to see to it that the trees on their pavements be watered. He will also incorporate the care of the trees in the maintenance plan of the school.
- 4.4 Hoër Volksskool: Miems Lamprecht undertook to contact this school, but at the time of finishing this report I did not have receive feedback.
- 4.5 Central Primary: Has not yet been contacted.

5. Media coverage:

The Oak Avenue Project had exceptionally good media coverage during 2017. The *Herald*, with Marianke Snyman as their representative, has always been one of the champions of heritage conservation in Potchefstroom. The newspaper published numerous articles and reports and is a willing and very helpful partner. Three television news items on two stations were broadcasted during the year. This created nation-wide interest and I subsequently was contacted by a few individuals and a company concerning the Oak Avenue. The latter is the manufacturer of a pervious (porous) paving which could laid under the Oak Avenue. It consists of a foundation of large rocks and a product that absorbs water on top. This has been installed under trees of the eThekwin (Durban) Municipality. Since this only happened late last year, it will also be followed up this year.

During September 2017 Miss SA, Demi-Leigh Nel-Peters, visited Potchefstroom. Vincent Eastes, who co-ordinated her visit, was able to slot a photo opportunity with Demi in the Oak Avenue. These photographs were published in various media, creating further interest for the project. In November 2017 Demi was crowned as Miss Universe.

6. In order to inform residents living next to the Oak Avenue on the plight of the trees, a pamphlet was produced. This was written by myself with expert advice from Prof Sarel Cilliers. Bongumsa Hlonghwa of the Potchefstroom Museum and Marianke Snyman designed the pamphlet. It was printed by Ad-Eeze and paid for by Heritage Potchefstroom Erfenis. The pamphlet was placed in the post boxes of all houses next to the Oak Avenue. The pamphlet was also distributed electronically to the tenants in some of the developments on the Bult.

7. Potchefstroom Art Society

After initially asking them to launch an art competition for learners to create awareness for the Oak Avenue, the Potchefstroom Art Society, decided to instead dedicate their annual exhibition in the gallery of the Potchefstroom Museum to the Oak Avenue. Members were invited to submit works with the Oak Avenue as theme. It was decided that all paintings should be on a round canvas. Numerous artists contributed paintings, sculptures and even jewellery. The exhibition took place in November 2017.

Learners from the Hoër Volksskool also participated.

Special permission was given to the Planning students to exhibit their streetscape models at the exhibition.

The Oak Avenue Interest Group is indebted to the Potchefstroom Art Society for their endeavours.

8. Parks Department

The most important role player in the whole project is the Parks Department of the Municipality. Messrs Thomas Muswede and Johan Visser attended meetings and various meetings have been held with Mr Muswede and other staff of the Parks Department concerning the Oak Avenue.

A discussion group was convened between officials of the Parks Department with myself and Mr. André de Villiers in order to be of assistance to the Department in matters concerning the Oak Avenue. This includes watering the trees, erecting barriers around the trees in areas with high volumes of traffic and re-planting of trees.

After initial discussions, it was decided to extend an invitation to property owners bordering on the Oak Avenue to commit themselves to the caring of the trees on their pavements. Although some reaction was received, it was not nearly as enthusiastic as was expected.

9. Steve Biko Avenue Interest Group

On the initiative of Mrs. Jolita Janse van Rensburg an interest group was started to specifically focus on the oak trees on the northernmost part of the avenue.

Some of the suggestions that came forth were:

- Founding an NPO to ensure continuity in the care of the Oak Avenue.
- Reduce parking under the trees, by creating gardens around the base of the trees which will ensure more water reaching the roots of the trees.
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10. Rotary Anns

The Anns decided to facilitate the planting of a tree in the Kock Street area. They surveyed the street, found places where oak trees have died. They then contacted the property owners and negotiated with them to commit – in writing – to the care of the oak tree on their pavement. Subsequently a tree was planted with the homeowner signing a pledge to care for the tree.

2018

As stated numerous times during 2017, caring for the oak trees is a life-long task for all involved. For Reuben Gericke who was the driving force behind the initial planting of the trees, it was such a task.

Urgent matters to be attended to include the trees at the Bult shopping area and watering the trees. Apart from other ongoing aspects such as discussed above, the following includes some of the objectives for 2018:

- Assisting the Municipality and Parks Department in creating a formal policy for the City Council and Municipality on the Oak Avenue.
- Included will be a development plan for the Oak Avenue.
- Engaging business owners of businesses with the words: “oak,” “eik” or “akker” in their name to contribute towards funding for the project.

The Historic Oak Avenue of Potchefstroom is indebted to all parties who have engaged in the preservation of this historic site so far.

Lennie Gouws
Chairperson:

Historic Oak Avenue Interest Group

