

## Alex renewal makes progress

*Written by Lucille Davie*

*23 February 2012*

*www.joburg.org.za*

*With 14 500 houses built, hostels remodelled, electricity, water and sewage upgraded, parks created, bridges built and roads tarred, the Alex Renewal Project has made a huge difference in the lives of the people of Alexandra.*

ALEXANDRA township is better because of the work done by the Alexandra Renewal Project (ARP), says an expert in development planning.

“An extraordinary amount has been done,” says Professor Phil Harrison, the South African resident chair in development planning and modelling in the School of Architecture and Planning at Wits University.

The ARP, announced in 2001 by former president Thabo Mbeki, is a township renewal project of huge proportions. The township houses some 350 000 people in overcrowded and unhealthy conditions.

The initial seven-year budget of R1,3-billion was spent by 2005, three years before the project deadline of 2008. The deadline was extended to 2011, and has been extended again to 2014. Over the past 10-year period, R1,9-billion has been spent.

The original 2,5km<sup>2</sup> township was established in 1912 in what was then farmland, distant from the town centre. At the time blacks could own property, and up until the 1960s, when the government took away their freehold titles, all property was privately owned. From that time owners, who then were forced to rent their former homes, built and rented backyard shacks, using the income to pay their rent to the council. It wasn't long before the township became an overcrowded ghetto.

The ARP was begun in 2001 to “conduct a sustained campaign against urban poverty and underdevelopment”, by helping to reduce unemployment, creating a healthy living environment, upgrading infrastructure, upgrading housing and creating new housing, and reducing crime.

It was always intended that conventional methods of upgrading and upliftment would not be followed, and instead a policy of “learning by doing” would be the preferred route.

Mbeki said at the time of the launch of the project: “These programmes will, among other things, entail investment in the economic and social infrastructure, human resource development, enterprise development, the enhancement of the development capacity of local government, poverty alleviation and the strengthening of the criminal justice system.”

In the past 10 years the results have been impressive. Some 14 500 housing units have been built of an estimated 45 000 required; three hostels have been remodelled to accommodate families; and

major electricity, water and sewage upgrades have been undertaken, supplying 70 000 Alex households with reliable services. Several kilometres of parkland along the Jukskei River have been created. Bridges and pedestrian walkways have been built across the river. All roads in Alex have been tarred, and several have been widened.

Housing has extended over the Jukskei River, creating the Far East Bank, where most of the new housing has gone up. Land in the neighbouring suburbs of Modderfontein, Linbro Park, Frankenwald and Waterval Estate has been secured.

### **Innovative solutions**

Housing has been created specifically to meet the needs of Alexandrans. “The ARP has been recognised for piloting new innovative solutions to meet the demands of a diverse group of generally poor people in well located settlements. This ranges from the affordable rental room project with shared ablutions to the combination of primary and rental units arranged around a yard (K206),” said ARP director Job Sithole in a 2010 report to the mayoral committee.

K206 refers to the name given to one of the housing complexes.

“These models also respond to the need to make housing economically sustainable as well as to respond to the fact that in Alexandra the renting out of accommodation is probably the biggest informal business activity driving the local economy.”

One of the major challenges is to de-densify Alex. Harrison says that although shacks have been removed from river banks and school sports fields, as people have been given houses on the Far East Bank, the growth of informal housing has been slowed but not reversed.

He acknowledges that progress in de-densification has been made. “Progress has been fairly modest but not insignificant.”

He says that the underlying infrastructure has changed quite significantly. “The ARP has been very successful in many ways in an extremely difficult environment.”

This is despite the perceptions of people that not much has been done, but they have “short memories”, adds Harrison.

It’s only when it directly affects a person’s life, like being moved to a new house, that people will concede that progress has been made, says Neels Letter, deputy director at the ARP. Otherwise, infrastructure upgrades, which have made a significant difference to people’s everyday lives, are never acknowledged.

“What we’ve achieved is outstanding,” he says.

Both Harrison and Letter agree that the ARP is a long-term project which needs adequate funding to reach its goals.

“We have to get realistic about what we can achieve, with the funding restrictions,” says Letter.

### **Infrastructure improvements**

Water supply in Alexandra has always been erratic. Large areas had very low water pressure with no spare capacity for new housing projects. A new water reservoir was constructed in Linbro Park, with a supply pipe to Alexandra. As a result water supply and pressure is now stable and reliable.

Other water supply lines have been upgraded, making the development of the Far East Bank possible.

Roads have been tarred, some 22km of pavements have been tarred, and the widening of Vincent Tshabalala (formerly London) Road has improved connectivity to the N3 and Old Pretoria Road. The extension of Rautenbach Street and the widening of Watt Street have improved access to Sandton. Florence Moposho (formerly Vasco da Gama) Road and a bridge were constructed to improve the connection between Alexandra and the East Bank. Two pedestrian bridges have been built across the Jukskei River.

The opening of the Gautrain station in Alex has broadened the transport networks for people living in the township.

“The proximity of this station will over time have an enormous impact on the Greater Alexandra area as it will become a catalyst for further development and private sector investment,” noted Sithole in his report.

In 2001 when the project kicked off it was found that the electrical network was unstable and dangerous because of the thousands of illegal connections. An electrical master plan was developed, which saw the stabilisation of the overall network through the upgrading of bulk infrastructure. This meant that 33 000 households have received new connections from a new overhead electricity network. A further 37 000 households still need to be connected.

### **Social services**

To bring down the high levels of crime in Alex, a new police station was constructed in 2001. This was boosted by investment in street and public lighting, resulting in a reduction of crime by 2006 of 40 percent.

Some 18 schools in the township have been refurbished, while three schools were demolished and rebuilt. “Extensive training of teachers, governing bodies, support management and administrative staff were undertaken,” indicates Sithole. As a result, the matric pass rate jumped from 17 percent in 2001 to 69 percent in 2006.

Alex’s four clinics have been refurbished, and three new ambulances have been purchased. A hospice is planned for the Far East Bank, and a mental health clinic is under construction. The nearby Edenvale Hospital has been upgraded, with a new HIV/Aids clinic.

Sport and recreational facilities have been improved and upgraded at No 3 Square, Altrek Sports Precinct and Alexandra Stadium. This includes an all-weather athletics track. A youth precinct has been created, with a skateboard track, basketball courts and a small stadium.

In addition, the creation of parks and open spaces along the Jukskei River has improved the quality of life of Alexandrans. Some 7 500 households have been moved from river banks to new housing and around 37ha of land has been developed.

The two Alexandra cemeteries have been upgraded, an air quality monitoring station has been built, and a waste recycling facility is up and running.

### **Job creation**

According to the 2005 socio-economic survey of 2005, 60 percent of the economically active population in Alex was not in full-time employment. The ARP has focused on creating institutional support to people looking for work or keen to start their own small business. The Business Place was established, offering advice and support to entrepreneurs. A labour advice centre has also been established to help youth find work.

The ARP has also provided support to the automotive, retail, construction and tourism sectors in the form of training, support to develop business plans, and access to finance.

The ARP has favoured local contractors and labour, successfully training locals, then helping them to find other jobs with the skills learnt.

“Modest gains as far as unemployment is concerned have been made as a result of all the interventions. There has been an increase in entrepreneurial activity from 7 percent to 11 percent and a decrease in unemployment from 31 percent to 27 percent,” states Sithole in his report.

The spin-off can be seen in private sector investments in Alexandra: the Alexandra Plaza and Pan Africa Retail Centres have brought R417-million into the township. The Pan Africa Centre has developed 7ha of land, housing 1 000 taxis and creating 78 trader stalls.

“The Greater Alexandra area is starting to become a destination in its own right,” wrote Sithole.

### **Housing**

Housing in Alex is an emotive and challenging issue, with demand always outstripping supply.

Several challenges have had to be faced. At first households were relocated outside of Alex, to Bramfisherville and Diepsloot, where affordable land was available. This was stopped in 2004, and land closer to Alex, albeit more expensive, was identified. As a result residential densities have had to be increased to make the most of the available land. Increased densities also mean that construction costs are higher, making the houses less affordable for some target groups.

The reason why so little redevelopment and upgrading of the original Alexandra has taken place is that, although most land claims were settled with a payment of R50 000, residents have taken the

government to court, arguing that the R50 000 was a payment for “injustices suffered”, and did not constitute “compensation for the expropriation of the properties”.

This has meant that since 2005 no progress has been made in the redevelopment of old Alex. Therefore the vision for “high-density development along main transportation routes, the development of nodes of mixed use, and the formalisation/improvement/replacement of existing housing stock in the yards” has not taken place.

The two organisations representing residents, the Alexandra Land and Property Owners’ Association and the Alexandra Property Owners’ Rights organisation, have litigated against the government to re-open the restitution debate. The ARP has been stopped from developing any land in old Alex until the matter has been settled.

Some efforts have been made to get the organisations involved in discussions by making them partners in the redevelopment of old Alex.

A 2005 survey found that 51 percent of Alex residents do not consider the township to be their home. Some 49 percent of residents are single parents, while 93 percent of households earn less than R5 000 a month, with 20 percent earning less than R1 000 a month. This means that “household priorities will therefore differ”, resulting in differing housing needs.

“A one-type-fits-all approach will not work in Alexandra. Couple this with the very low levels of income and there is wide recognition that this poses severe challenges in housing delivery,” noted Sithole.

Nonetheless, since 2001 the ARP has delivered 14 500 housing units of mixed tenure in Diepsloot, Bramfisherville and the Greater Alexandra area.

When asked how he feels when it seems that progress is slow, Letter says: “When you move a family from a shack, you just need to look at their faces – that’s all the reward you need. You’ve just got to keep hammering at the door, you cannot give up.”