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DEPARTMENT:
Economic Development & Tourism

PROVINCE OF KWAZULU-NATAL

Drakensberg Cable Car



In the late 1800s a French engineer, Gustave Eiffel, rattled the inner sanctum of the leading lights of the French arts community when he proposed to build an iconic structure that was not only deemed unfeasible by the French upper crust but which they also believed, just as well, was artistically tasteless.

The story is told that when Eiffel presented his idea - which he himself had bought from two other engineers - to the French government to build the tower in commemoration of the centenary of the French revolution, a committee of three hundred, representing one member for each metre of the tower's height, was formed and included some of the prominent figures of French arts establishment at the time. In their petition, published in a newspaper, the committee was not diplomatic in voicing its disdain for the project.

"To bring our arguments home, imagine for a moment a giddy, ridiculous tower dominating Paris like a gigantic black smokestack, crushing under its barbaric bulk Notre Dame, the Tour de Saint-Jacques, the Louvre, the Dome of les Invalides, the Arc de Triomphe, all of our humiliated monuments will disappear in this ghastly dream. And for twenty years ... we shall see stretching like a blot of ink the hateful shadow of the hateful column of bolted sheet metal".



As fate would have it, the tower was eventually completed on March, 31, 1889, without so much as the structure dwarfing other highly prized Paris tourist attractions as had been predicted by the ragtag bunch of France's upper class.

More than 100 years later, the structure is not only one of the most enduring symbols of French scientific achievements, but is one of the biggest tourist attractions in the world, having been visited by more than 250 million people since it was constructed. But what, you may ask – does the Eiffel tower has to do with the province of KwaZulu-Natal?

As the provincial Department of Economic Development and Tourism, we believe the lessons of how the Eiffel tower came about are instructive after last week we embarked on public consultations on one of the most ambitious projects in the province of KwaZulu-Natal – the construction of the Drakensberg Cable Car.

To recap, the province of KwaZulu-Natal, in order to ensure that it sharpens its competitive and comparative edge as a tourist attraction, put together a 20 year tourism master plan in which it identified key projects that needed to be pursued for the province to put the province at the apex of the global tourism market. As part of the plan, six iconic catalytic projects, including the Drakensberg Cable Car, were identified as being critical for unlocking the potential of the tourism industry in KwaZulu-Natal. The other

projects are include the statue of King Shaka; the Bluff Bridge and the Isandlwana Development Precinct.

The plan was informed by many factors, chief among which is the fact that tourism, as an industry, is emerging as one of the fastest growing industries in the world, as evidenced by statistical evidence which shows that in 2012 more than one billion international tourist arrivals were recorded in the world. Significantly, Africa is not only emerging as the next frontier of growth in the world, but is the second fastest growing region after Asia; a scenario which presents a plethora of opportunities for the tourism industry in the province. Also, research has shown that the continent of Africa is increasingly becoming one of the province's key sources of tourism markets. This means that the economic vicissitudes of the African continent will have a direct impact on the province.

Critically, the province of KwaZulu-Natal is currently the net attractor of domestic tourism in the province and the construction of the King Shaka International Airport has put the province in good stead to attract more international tourist arrivals. In short, we believe that in order for the province to continue to attract more domestic tourists and attract more international arrivals, it cannot be business as usual. It is because of this reason that last year we commissioned consultants, Graham Muller and Associates to do a feasibility study on the construction of the cable way at the Drakensberg.

After a painstaking process which investigated the construction of the cable car at no less than 16 sites, the study found that it was feasible to build a cable car at the Busingatha site in Mount Amery.

As the report from the consultants puts it: “

“The Drakensberg Cableway is envisioned as a world-class tourism attraction in the Busingatha Valley, just south of Royal Natal National Park. It is envisaged that this will be a one of a kind attraction providing tourists of all ages and physical prowess the opportunity to ascend in comfort and safety close to the summit of Mount Amery where visitors will be able to enjoy (on most days) extensive vistas of the Drakensberg escarpment top and of the valleys below. On cloudy days, the vista will generally be a spectacularly beautiful mountain peaks jutting out from a moving sea of white cloud

filling the valleys below. The development will constitute a sensitively engineered balance between eco-tourism and conservation related facilities, top-class nature and cultural education interpretative centres, together with a wide range of recreational, hospitality and commercial services.”



The development will be located in the northern Drakensberg Mountains near Bergville, an estimated four hour drive from either Johannesburg or Durban. The preferred site is also in close proximity to other major nature conservation and recreational areas such as the Okhahlamba – Drakensberg World Heritage Park and Spionkop and Chelmsford Dams in KwaZulu-Natal; Golden Gate National Park, Witsieshoek Mountain Resort and Sterkfontein Dam Nature Reserve in the Free State; and the Afriski Snow Skiing and Mountain Biking Resort in Lesotho.

The majority of tourists will travel to the cableway via the N3 national route, from either Johannesburg or Durban. Annual traffic figures indicate a steady increase in road traffic along the N3 national route. In 2011, an average of over 11 000 vehicles moved through the Tugela toll plaza daily, or over 4 million annually. This is an increase from just over 8000 daily in 2003. The base of the cableway would be accessible by travelling approximately 60km off the N3 national route.

When we presented the feasibility study in the July this year, we made an undertaking that in keeping with constitutional injunctions, we would embark on a thorough process of consultation with all the community members and interested parties that would be affected by the cable way. As such, last Saturday, 23 November 2013 we met with communities that were largely from the three traditional councils which will be directly

affected by the cable way and the general community from the uThukela District. Not only was the meeting a phenomenal success but the project received an overwhelming endorsement from more than 15 000 people who attended the event.

We will also meet all interested parties in order to ensure that the process is done genuinely and all interested parties are given an opportunity to air their opinions on the proposed project. While we cannot predict the outcome of public consultations, we strongly believe that this process requires us to look at all the issues comprehensively instead of over-emphasizing one issue over the other.

Critically, we urge communities to engage with us in good faith, without pursuing sectarian interests and being blind to the bigger picture. The fact is that none of us can today imagine Durban without the iconic Moses Mabhida stadium. Yet, there were some among us who thought that this was another vanity project which would not meaningfully-contribute neither to visual aesthetics of our city nor the economy of our province. The hosting of such major events as the 2010 Fifa Soccer World Cup; the 2012 Africa Cup of Nations and the Top Gear Festival, to mention but a few, has definitely proven the sceptics wrong.

In India for instance, where they have introduced a cable car concept not dissimilar to ours in the Kashmir mountain range, they have witnessed a rapid upsurge in tourist numbers as well as remarkable economic figures. It is estimated that since the Kashmir cable car became operational, the region has achieved an additional turnover of \$ 5,490,990.

This pointedly suggests that indeed the construction of the cable car in this part of the province could add further impetus to an already existing tourism base. Critically, this project will have domino development effects in the area. These include, among others, a proposed tranquil resort comprising a range of accommodation ranging from camping sites to hotels and lodges.

We believe that the proposed Cable Car will further enhance visitor experience, achieve geographical spread in terms of tourism product development and unlock opportunities

not only for investors but also for the surrounding communities in terms of job creation, employment opportunities and ignite local entrepreneurial spirit.

As all of us know, the National Department of Tourism through the National Tourism Sector Strategy has prioritized domestic tourism as a key driver for tourism growth in the country hence a needs assessment is being undertaken to enhance tourism products around world heritage sites. As the Department of Economic Development and Tourism, we want to call on all stakeholders to engage with us on the project.

In engaging on this project, we also need to keep it in mind that in the shifting sands of the global economic landscape; only those countries which are constantly shaping their competitive and comparative advantages will remain relevant. Like the Eiffel Tower, we hope the project, barring any other major stumbling block, can put the province on the world tourism map.



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