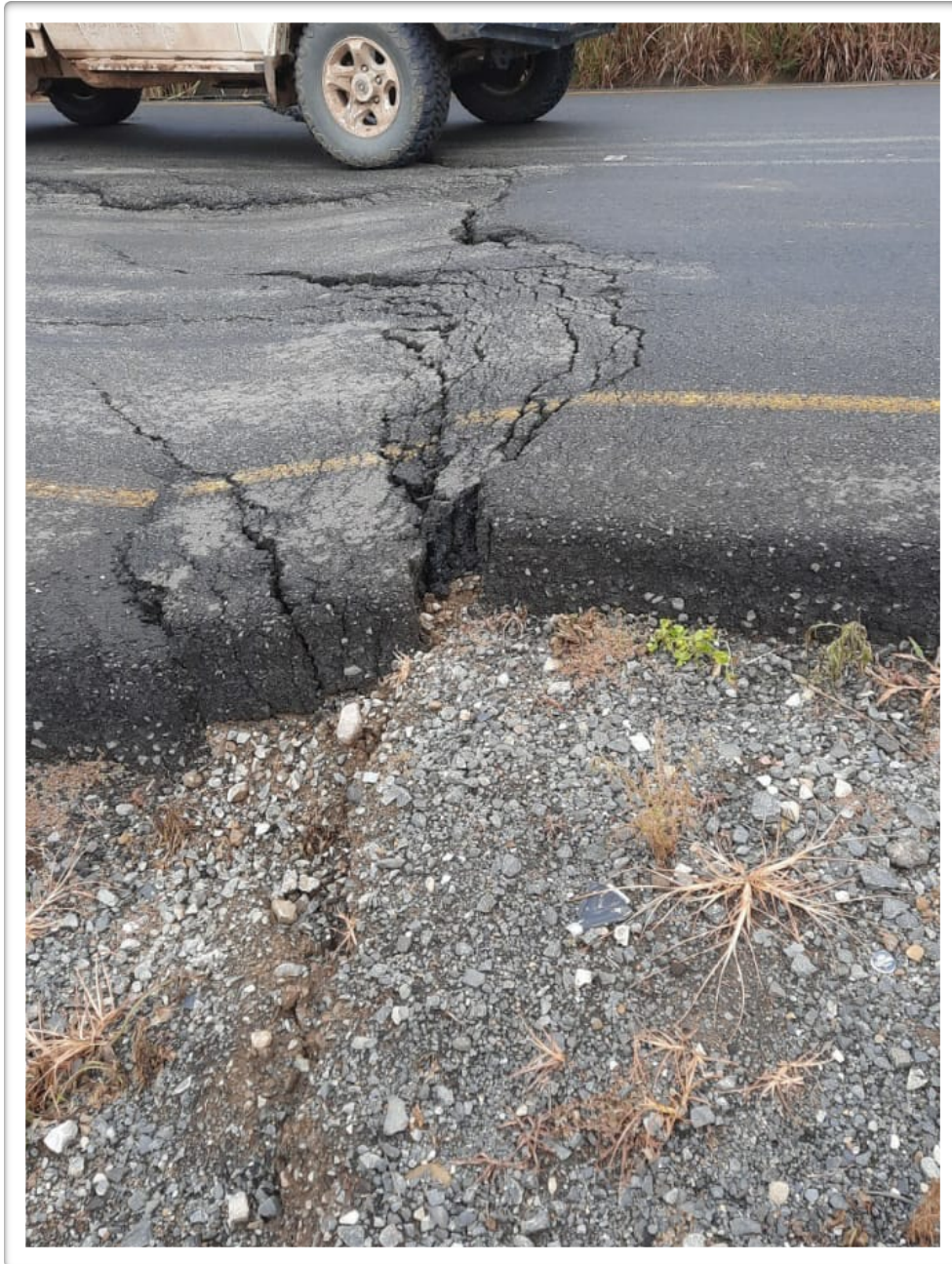

OKHAHLAMBA'S CRUMBLING ROAD ECONOMY



DEAR MEMBERS OF PARLIAMENT,

Please find a short report stating observations from the Okhahlamba Region's crumbling Road infrastructure. As a concerned Community we petitioned Parliament as last resort, after our pleas and concerns fell on deaf ears.

We look forward to sharing a conversation next Tuesday and thank you for the opportunity.

Okhahlamba Region

Population : 135 132

Unemployment Rate : 43%

Major Economic sectors: Agriculture & Tourism

Piped Water inside Dwelling : 5,9%¹

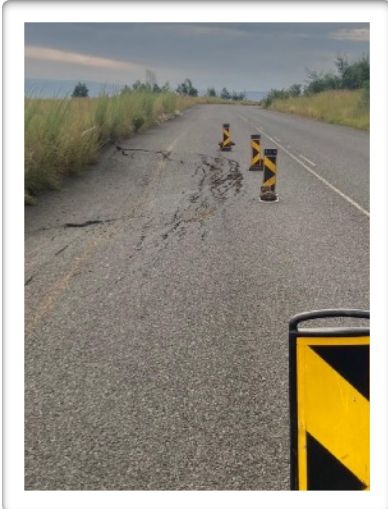
Okhahlamba is a mainly rural region that is serviced by two small towns called Bergville, and Winterton. The Okhahlamba UNESCO Drakensberg Park is situated to the east of the region, and these Drakensberg Mountains are responsible for both the fertile valleys, and the natural splendour that lends itself further to Tourism.



¹ <https://municipalities.co.za/demographic/1104/okhahlamba-local-municipality>

NATIONAL ROADS IN OKHAHLAMBA

The R74 is the main arterial road that runs from Harrismith in the Free State through the towns of Bergville and Winterton onto the N3 and Ladysmith. The Oliviershoek Pass is vital to Tourism in the Northern Berg as Visitors from GP and the FS access this part of the region via the Oliviershoek Pass.



During 2010 - 2014 the Free State R74 road section of the pass was in disrepair after a Contractor was paid in advance and disappeared with the funds. The fact that this vital road was closed for 3 years led to the direct closure of at least one large Hotel in the Northern Berg, and the reduction in operations of many others^{2 3}. The Northern Berg was just recovering from that loss as the Covid Lockdowns hit.

This picture below is a current wash away is on the R74 Oliviershoek Pass, local KZN spheres of Government has been informed of this pending disaster as far as two years ago, and their only solution was danger tape.

Please see an online clip of another such a failure on the Oliviershoek Pass. Now imagine driving down this Pass⁴ with your family on a rainy night as you arrive from GP, pitch dark, 1000 meter drops on the side and rain reducing your visibility.



² <https://www.tourismupdate.co.za/article/there-light-end-drakensberg-r74-road>

³ <https://mg.co.za/article/2014-11-06-r100-million-to-fix-tender-road-to-ruin/>

⁴ <https://www.icloud.com/icloudrive/06dJMIVpg8xSb053LZd2zttiw#65d8a3e9-eade-4afa-91cf-8ce2b4414d7b>

ROADS IN THE LOCAL TOWNS

This intersection greets you on the R74 as you arrive⁵⁶ from the Free State at the local Seat of Government - Bergville. You will note our lovely Municipal Building in the background.

Many news paper articles⁷ were published in the past two years to try and drive awareness around the issue of crumbling roads in Okhahlamba, and the potential to ruin the Economy and many thousands of livelihoods.



⁵ https://www.icloud.com/icloudrive/0f5dl2yKBbVNjwQEBZfkpdKqw#IMG_0800

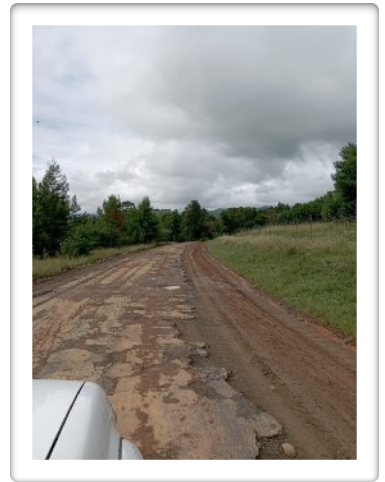
⁶ https://www.icloud.com/icloudrive/069uQbnQLZVaGlzmr_cAz6obg#IMG_0801

⁷ https://drive.google.com/drive/folders/1PFMX9p76_3ZuDLIP9v_b5D1hd8bS-wOF?usp=sharing

DISTRICT ROADS

This is a road to Cayley Lodge, a property that caters to the Luxury Hospitality Market. Cayley Lodge employs 90 members of staff in its operations, and in the broader scheme it provides a living for 630 residents of Okhahlamba.

The D184 has been deteriorating for sometime now, and be it, that it is one of the extreme examples, it is definitely not an isolated one with many of the district roads that currently service tourism establishments heading in this direction at a frightening fast pace.



DIRT ROADS

Agriculture is a main economic drivers in Okhahlamba. The fertile valleys in Okhahlamba produce far above average compared to the rest of the Country in term of staple crops like maize and soya. All these farming operations need working infrastructure to get goods to market. The condition of the District Gravel roads are of major concern, they become water logged during the wet summers as maintenance during the dry Winter months are just not adequate. This leads to regular disruption when heavy trucks and farming equipment become stuck in mud pits.

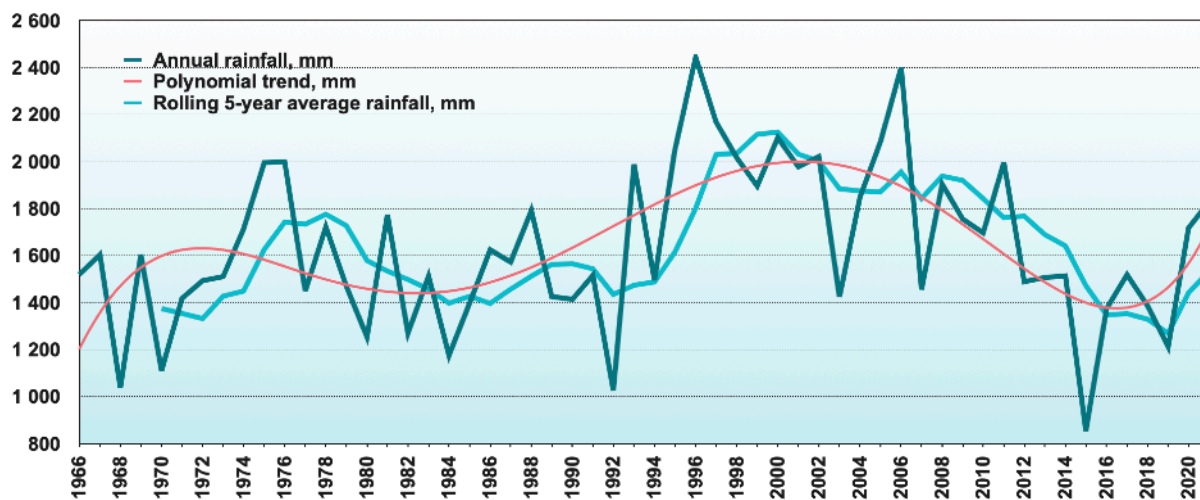
In 2021 I was contacted by a farmer that had to close down his Chicken Broiler Operation as the Egg embryos was separating and dying because to the bad condition and excessive vibration caused by the dirt roads. This was a 15 year old business that is now gone and with it went much needed jobs, and taxable income.



RAINFALL AVERAGES

101 Rainfall, mm	Jan	Feb	Mar	Apr	May	Jun	Jul	Aug	Sep	Oct	Nov	Dec	Total
56-year minimum	124	89	37	1	0	0	0	0	0	27	54	91	854
56-year maximum	594	545	569	237	126	67	127	171	355	358	426	665	2 444
56-year average	293	267	238	91	24	11	15	37	64	146	183	267	1 635
20-year average	309	283	226	101	20	16	15	37	56	136	180	272	1 650
10-year average	236	286	192	108	17	7	17	28	57	112	145	236	1 440
5-year average	248	383	156	146	19	4	1	31	48	104	150	243	1 533
2021	411	348	108	141	32	16	0	59	116	104	187	308	1 830
2022	531	238	236										1 005

Please find the Rainfall averages taken at the Monks Cowl section of the Okhahlamba UNESCO Drakesberg Park. Be it that we had high rainfall these past years, the 2021 figure of 1 830mm is still only 200mm above the 56 year average, and far below the maximum of 2 444mm.



The red trend-line since from 1966 onwards also points that we are currently in an upward rainfall cycle.

STEPS TAKEN

The Tourism Sector is most cohesive and organised and they have been engaging with the local Okhahlamba Municipality since 2018 when a marked reduction in Road conditions became apparent. In the past potholes always appeared during the wet months, but they would have been fixed during the dry Winter months, for an unknown reason this ongoing maintenance reduced from 2018 onwards.

Many letters were written to both Okhahlamba in its role as the local Sphere of Government and then also later onto the local DOT (Dept of Transport). I myself was present at stakeholder meetings where the DOT just won't pitch. During the Lockdown roads deteriorated further and the steps taken by the community include appealing to the Press to help create awareness.

After many please, and press releases a petition was drawn and a community meeting was called. The Petition was sent to the KZN MEC of Transport and the Minister of Transport last October. It's sad to say that neither the MEC nor the Minister delivered any response and we are thankful for Parliament to offer us an audience in its oversight role.

CONCERNS

The functioning of any modern society is rooted in the basics of infrastructure, be it transport, energy, communication etc. The residents of Okhahlamba is concerned that the crumbling road infrastructure will impeded their livelihoods and ability to provide for families.

Tourism relies on Visitors, both local and abroad, and the feedback from visiting Tourist are that the deteriorating condition of the roads will make them go to another region on their next Holiday.

Potential Conference Clients send our Conference Organisers to come and inspect facilities, and once they arrive at a Conference Hospitality Destination like Champagne Sports Resort they express real concerns about the viability of the Drakensberg as a conference destination seeing the condition of the roads delegates will have to travel to get here.

Agriculture is a highly dynamic fast moving sector, where working roads are needed to access markets.

Please see a response from a local SME after a long weekend during 2021:

James Seymour wrote:

" Sorry to harp on the Road situation !

At the KZN TOURISM meeting everyone supported my and other complaints about the potholes!

A few facts : over the Women's Day long weekend , between Bergville and Wlnteron - 37 new tyres and 17 rims were sold !

On Monday night one of our guests lost two tyres !

It does not matter how much positive marketing , we do , if the access roads cause so many problems , they are creating negative marketing and experiences!

Pressure must be applied to repair the roads !

We all know detrimental impact the R74 had on Tourism !"

RELIEF SOUGHT

As resident we will really appreciate a high level Parliamentary investigation into the;

1. Road Budget Provisions for Okhahlamba;
 - 1.1. If it is adequate to both address the perceived backlog on road maintenance and infrastructure,
 - 1.2. and forward looking requirements.
2. the recent Inspection Report after Road surveys was done around 13 October, and 12 November 2021.
3. the lack of action by Spheres of Government when they were repeatedly informed of pending doom by residents and how to rectify the situation going forward.
4. For the Oliviershoek Pass to be awarded special status to both rehabilitate and correct the condition of the Pass seeing its national importance as an alternative to the N3 Van Reenen Pass, and its importance both economically and operationally, for the residents of Okhahlamba, especially those in the Northern Berg.

About the Author.

I have been immersed in the Region and its people for almost 20 years now. I was privileged to a humble start in Hospitality, and with great leadership, I was allowed to climb the ladder and eventually ended up as a COO and Director of one such a Drakensberg Hospitality Property. After 8 years at the helm it was time for a new challenge and I found myself as a Councillor. Now serving in the District Municipality on a part-time basis, with my feet still solidly set in Tourism, the one sector that can still transform South Africa for its People.

With thanks.

Thys Janse van Rensburg.

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Local Artists selling to travelling Tourists.