

July 26th - Neglect by City of Public Amenities

At a meeting on Friday of Seafront for All's executive, it was decided to make public our recent letter to Councillor J P Smith regarding the gross neglect by the City of various public amenities, in particular the Sea Point Pavilion Swimming Pools. The letter, amongst other points, also draws attention to the fruitless discussions, over 18 months, which relate to the condition of the wooden bungalows at Milton Road.

Capetonians will recall that it was not long ago that the old Carousel building at the Pavilion was demolished. Doubtless they will also recall the neglect which preceded the demolition. SEAFA therefore feels bound to draw our members attention to the extent of the current neglect of our amenities and the implications this could have for the Atlantic Seaboard Public Open Space.

By Email July 18th, 2009 Councillor J P Smith, City of Cape Town Dear Councillor Smith You and many at the City of Cape Town are familiar with the work of Seafront for All to preserve the Public Open Space on the Atlantic seaboard. You will also know that we appreciate the hard work and dedication which you personally put into the running of our Ward. Your efforts, and those of many at the City, are to be commended. However, it appears, in some areas, particularly those related to City property and amenities, that there are grave shortfalls in the delivery of even the most basic services. Indeed it appears, in some respects, that sectors within these departments have totally ceased to function. This problem has been a long time in the making, but more worrying is that there appears to be no apparent end in sight. Officials and departments hide one behind the other blaming history, previous regimes, and any number of other excuses while all the while "Rome is burning". Vast amounts of time are spent offering excuses for the lack of performance, accompanied by grave nodding of heads and agreement that the situation "is shocking". This pattern has been allowed to continue for far too many years and the consequences are everywhere to be seen. We draw your attention to only three examples; two on the Atlantic seaboard, and one in the City Centre – The Sea Pavilion Swimming Pools The neglect of maintenance at the Sea Point Pavilion Swimming Pools is a disgrace. There appears to be no reasonable excuse. We appreciate that wider delivery is required from a rates base that has not proportionately increased, that there is great need and that resources at many levels are limited. However, in the case of the Pavilion, mismanagement, neglect and lack of accountability take a greater toll than the cumulative shortage of resources. The pools are the most beautiful in the world and, having been enjoyed and cared for by generations of Capetonians, the building is of significant heritage value. The facility is broadly used and shared and the area is an internationally admired and visited destination. It speaks volumes about the City departments under whose stewardship this amenity falls, that the deterioration which has been condoned will cost R2.5 million to repair. Much of this cost results not from the lack of capital but from the simple failure to take responsibility for the prized assets assigned to the City's care. The Wooden Bungalows (Milton Beach) These historic bungalows (the southern one in particular) show the effects of chronic neglect. For at least 18 months one City department has blamed the other for years of neglect and yet, within those 18 months, nothing has been done to alter or remedy the position. Indeed, in this period, the bungalows have been allowed to deteriorate still further and the problem of occupancy by vagrants has worsened. Seafront for All, along with two other organisations, has offered to rent and make appropriate community use of the premises, but all of our efforts have been continually obstructed. In our own case, among many other activities, and with your assistance and frequent intervention, we have – Attended numerous meetings, some where City officials have simply failed to arrive; – Offered countless ideas of ways in which civil society can work with the City to find appropriate solutions; – Received numerous commitments from City officials, who then fail to deliver; – Made innumerable phone calls to City officials who then fail to respond to messages or commit to responding, but do not; – Four times attended on-site meetings where access was promised but was not provided. I am sure you will appreciate that the cost to Seafront for All has been significant. Still, despite this, our commitment and efforts, for 18 months there has been no progress. I reserve comment should it transpire that there has been any strategic intent behind the neglect of the pools or bungalows. Beyond the Atlantic seaboard, but affected in the same way as the properties above, is one of the most significant buildings in our City. City Hall The condition of City Hall is a tragedy and the patterns of neglect are again evident. What building could be more iconic to South Africans than that from which Nelson Mandela addressed the nation in 1990? Still, the building is being allowed to deteriorate to a point where even the most basic repairs are going to cost many times more than would have been necessary had a proper maintenance plan been in place. For at least three years, regular appeals from concert goers to attend to simple and basic maintenance have resulted in no sign of change. Some examples of the evident neglect are that – The beautiful brass railings along the bays are in a shocking condition and are clearly being vandalised; – The brass treads from the south west stairs to the balcony have disappeared; – The brass plaques below the paintings in the David Bloomberg Room have likewise disappeared; – The condition of the toilets is a disgrace; – Security is, to all intents and purposes, non-existent, eg. an orchestra board member, after a recent concert, came across a vagrant sleeping in one of the bays – Gross negligence has resulted in significant damage to the organ – The magnificent and irreplaceable crystal chandelier in the foyer being destroyed. And so the list continues. To return to the Atlantic seaboard ….. Civil society and individuals have repeatedly come forward with offers of support and funding for which they seek no reward. The offers are ignored. Meetings have been convened, inspections conducted, reports prepared, health and safety risks identified, costings have been researched, publicity has been achieved, support has

been gathered, communities have come on board ……. yet no progress has been made. (It is worth noting that the greater part of this activity has been conducted not by the City employees responsible for these tasks, but by private individuals.) But, still, City departments fail to respond and officials remain mysteriously unaccountable. They seem to act, or, more accurately, not act, with impunity. Perhaps the comment by one official to our project manager (in relation to the Milton Road bungalows) was most telling of all; he asked why she did not just make everyone's life easier by allowing the City to demolish the Milton Road bungalows. Of course, there are City departments whose success has been remarkable. We certainly do not seek to detract from this. However, we all have rights and duties. This is the backbone that sustains democracy and, in the same way as the City has the reasonable right to certain expectations of its citizens, so too do its citizens have the right to expect performance from the City. It is indefensible that certain departments have for so long and so frequently failed the people of Cape Town. We believe that allowing this situation to continue will result in incalculable damage to the assets and amenities under the City's control, to trust and goodwill and, ultimately, to the civic pride which is a mark of all fine cities. I must add that, while shameless developers and their allies may have other plans for the Sea Point Pavilion and Promenade, this has no bearing on our right to expect of local government that ongoing and proper care be taken of our City's assets. It was Benjamin Franklin who said - "For the want of a nail, the shoe was lost; for the want of a shoe the horse was lost; and for the want of a horse the rider was lost, being overtaken ….. by the enemy, all for the want of care about a horseshoe nail." We hope that the same will not need to prove true for the facilities of the City of Cape Town. Sincerely, Bennie RabinowitzChairman