

Towards a 5-star Muizenberg SAPS

Discussion piece for community organisations affected by the proposed upgrade of Muizenberg Police Station, January 2017

History

In 1946, owing to a growing local population, Muizenberg Junior School moved out of the combined school building (now the SAPS station) on School Road to its present location on Main Road. They were followed in the early Seventies - and for the same reason of inadequate space - by the High School, now situated on spacious grounds across the river in Marine Estate.

Since then the historic building has been occupied by Muizenberg SAPS (previously SAP), and in the same way as the schools - and for some of the same reasons - it has become increasingly and uncomfortably obvious that the current building (and the Magistrate's Court next to it) is severely inadequate to the needs of policing the extended Muizenberg police area.

New plans

After several years of discussion and planning, therefore, the national Public Works Department and an associated firm of architects has produced a detailed plan for the refurbishment of the original building, plus new specially designed additional buildings and an improved connection with the Magistrate's Court - all of this fitted into the current footprint of the property.

The proposed plan is in itself an excellent piece of work, demonstrating both a detailed knowledge of the requirements of an effective contemporary police station and an admirable degree of architectural professionalism. This would indeed be a 'five-star' station.

Response

Regrettably, this high-quality work has been rendered essentially irrelevant from the start: the conceptualising and design has - by accident or by policy - entirely ignored the crucial and foundational factor that makes the current police station (and any successor on the same site) so inadequate and inappropriate - namely, its physical location on the hill above the old village of Muizenberg.

What are the consequences of this assumption that the current site adequately meets the requirements of one of the state's most foundational mandates - the provision of safety, security justice to all the people?

Historic

- Neither the site nor the building itself was originally the product of deliberate strategic planning and design, but rather an opportunistic decision to make use of a large state-owned building that had

conveniently become available. This must have seemed a sensible and inexpensive option at the time, but that is no longer the case.

Demographic

- The population of the area served by Muizenberg SAPS has grown at an accelerating pace, especially since the early Nineties, and the socio-economic makeup and security needs of that growing population have also radically changed since the SAP first moved into the old school building.
- In particular, while relatively little has changed in the surrounding village that the station first served, and while several private security companies are active there, only SAPS can reasonably be expected to service the poorly resourced, insecure and often violence-plagued communities across Prince George Drive, several kilometers away from the current site.

Public access and operational response

This location and distance has damaging consequences for both SAPS and the communities concerned:

- First, while recognising that 'rapid response' is only one of the functions that must be accommodated in a professionally designed contemporary police station, it is nevertheless the case that minutes make a difference, and there are several hours a day when traffic on the relatively narrow through road towards the Cape Flats is reduced to a crawl; moreover, the sometimes necessary speeding of police vehicles down Atlantic Road and beyond is a potential danger to the many pedestrians who cross the road on their way to the beach, the library, the clinic and cafes.
- Secondly, the current and proposed location of the SAPS station and Magistrate's Court actively discourages people from the most needy communities from coming to these facilities with either their complaints or their potentially valuable information; money for a taxi (if taxis are available) is a major issue for many residents in these areas.

Political considerations - fair and just provision of service

- Twenty-two years after the advent of democracy, how can it be considered acceptable to spend an estimated R100 million rands on a deluxe essential public facility situated in the most privileged - and still mostly 'white' - far corner of a defined police area when the people most in need of its services are several kilometers away - especially when a far more appropriate alternative site is actually available (see below, *Alternative site*)?

Environment

- The old school (Junior and High) was appropriately situated next to Muizenberg Park, which the pupils could (and did) make use of for recreation. Over the last couple of decades, however, the park was seriously neglected, and is only now being restored - in a partnership

between City Parks and a local civil-society organisation - to its earlier status as a safe and popular public resource. The erection of a greatly enlarged set of buildings, and the likely greatly increased vehicular traffic, right on the edge of the park (both the lower - recreational - part and the upper - conservation - part) would have a severe negative impact on the park experience that is being so deliberately and carefully restored.

Cost

- The current building is situated on the relatively steep slope of a typical Western Cape mountain, where the underlying rock is only thinly covered by a layer of accumulated soil and vegetation. The proposed plans include the provision of underground parking cut out of the slope, and there is little doubt that this would be a highly expensive operation, probably including blasting - the expensive delays experienced by the contractors rebuilding the Main Road south from Muizenberg should serve as a warning in this respect.
- In addition, while the upgrade takes place the entire station must be housed in a temporary complex either built or adapted just for that purpose.

Alternatives to the current site

Considering the disadvantages - of inappropriateness, inconvenience and cost - enumerated above, it is surprising, even disturbing, that there does not appear to have been a serious attempt to consider the pro's and cons of alternative locations. For example, the City of Cape Town has already offered land for a new station and magistrates court adjacent to the M5, centrally located, and on flat ground.

Additional wasteful expenditure on temporary accommodation appears irresponsible when that can be avoided. The old building can be used while construction takes place at a better permanent location elsewhere.

Conclusion

Taking account of the various disadvantages and problems inherent in any proposal to revamp and extend the police station/magistrate's court complex on the current site, together with the apparent decision not to consider seriously an alternative location, we see no merit in the proposed plan, despite the thought and care that has gone into it.

Neither the trouble taken so far over the design, nor the regrettable continuing inconvenience to the SAPS and Court staff of continuing for several years in their present circumstances, can outweigh the severe and unavoidable disadvantages that underlie the proposal presented by Public Works.

To sum up, any proposal to extend and modernise the Muizenberg SAPS station and Magistrate's Court on their present site is not in the public interest and cannot, in our view, be rationally defended.