

Newsletter to Property Development and related professionals, and the Construction Sector

A short 10 weeks ago, the Western Cape Government launched an Economic War Room focused on, amongst other complex challenges, relieving systemic issues to make it easier for the property development and construction sector to get building, and create jobs.

Last month's announcement that the sector has shed a further 29000 jobs in quarter three in the Western Cape underscores the urgency of our work.

We are therefore pleased that we have started to achieve some tangible successes.

We established a team comprising city- and provincial officials and public entity members, to tackle the challenges in a collaborative way. Our starting point was to hear what needed to be fixed directly from those being affected. To date, we have held over fifty engagements with the private sector and our colleagues in government, developing a firm understanding of the burning issues holding back business. Our next objective was to break the problems down into very specific causes, and achievable actions to resolve these.

In every single interview, issues related to heritage and planning came out tops. Supply chain challenges also featured quite prominently as an issue raised by construction and consulting services businesses.

We felt inspired by the fact that if we could intervene to make changes in the two former areas, a large number of stakeholders would be positively impacted, and this is therefore where we have targeted our initial focus. A more detailed analysis is currently being undertaken on the latter issue.

In heritage, we identified seventy-six issues for further investigation and possible unblocking, and in planning, we identified forty-one. We tested these issues against the experience of the officials and to our surprise, the staff within our own organisations largely agreed – they have not been immune to the challenges faced, feeling their effects on a daily basis.

Then, we got to work, tackling those matters we felt we had authority over (some matters are in the national space, and will take longer to resolve), where acceptance was high that the issue needed to be addressed, and where we had the ability to drive change.

These are our successes to date:

1. Heritage Committee advert widened from needing a qualification and interest in heritage resource management to a qualification or interest in heritage resource management. This is to ensure a more balanced committee, and we are pleased to have heard directly from architects and developers that they have applied.
2. The agendas of Heritage Western Cape BELCOM meetings are now fully timed, with each applicant being given a specific slot to appear before the committee. Applicants no longer need to wait around for their item to come up, saving them time and professional fees.
3. The City of Cape Town has sent Heritage Western Cape its inventory of heritage properties, which will be workshopped and then tabled at an upcoming council meeting. Once approved, this document will serve as the heritage asset database for the City, giving clarity to City and HWC officials, as well as to the private sector, on which buildings and spaces are worthy of being assessed for their conservation value. It is estimated that 70% of cases currently serving before heritage committees could and should have been dealt with in the city planning processes, and going forward, this will be the case.
4. We have completed a capacity review of HWC, and have submitted a request to Province for the funding of vacant posts. This will ramp up the capacity of the team to process applications, and will unlock the possibility of a second BELCOM each month.
5. We have completed an assessment of the technical needs of HWC, and are in the process of installing additional software and hardware which will improve their efficiency.
6. We are in the process of creating a regular joint forum between the private sector, HWC, City Planning and the Western Cape Government EIA team. The EIA team has previously held such a session independently, which has yielded positive results in terms of processes, as well as greater understanding and trust. This step is designed to drive collaboration and better communication as we work toward the idea of streamlining our processes.
7. We are also excited that the City of Cape Town has adopted the amendments to the Municipal Planning By-Laws, which are due to be proclaimed by year end. These, for example, will once again allow applicants to request a 10% deviation without rezoning, and prescribe specific forms for appeals, adding rigour to this process. A more thorough By-Law review will take place next year as the City looks to further enhance its processes.

Further to the above positive steps which have already been achieved, we are actively working on a number of other initiatives to improve ease of doing business in this space.

Just three of these are: early investigations into a single public participation process and more streamlined application process across all three spheres; investigations into how by-laws across the various city departments can be streamlined to eliminate “catch 22’s”; and investigations into the timelines for water and stormwater connections with a view to making improvements.

A further issue raised with us was that the application forms for city planning approvals keep changing, and the private sector feels frustrated when their applications are rejected due to not being on the most recent form. In this respect, we would like to urge the sector to please **not** download and save the forms off the City website, reusing them time and again. When an application is required to be lodged, go to the applications and submissions section of the City’s planning portal to download the latest version of the form just prior to submitting. This should alleviate the problem in the interim. In the future, all applications will be made directly online, in keeping with technological trends around the world.

We’re currently in the process of deeply interrogating this space, and are excited by the gains we’ve managed to make in a relatively short space of time by working together. We are open-minded, sympathetic and eager to make it easier for the sector to operate.

In turn, we request your help in allowing us to focus on this work by lodging any specific case related issues which are not systemic with the red tape team, which will follow up on your behalf. The team may be contacted on redtape@westerncape.gov.za. In doing so, please share your specific case number and the name of the official you’ve previously dealt with – the team will eagerly assist you.

We hope that these advances go some way toward improving your experience of doing business and creating jobs in our province. We will continue to update you into the future as we have more announcements and information to share.

Fixed Capital and Property Development War Room Team

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