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MOVING TOWARDS THE VISION OF ECONOMIC RECOVERY: FOUR KEY FACTORS FOR PROPERTY DEVELOPMENT AND CONSTRUCTION

Following robust discussions held recently online during the two-day Western Cape Property Development’s “Vision for Growth” annual conference (20 to 21 May), a number of key points have emerged that will be critical to the future of the property development and construction industries as it recovers not only from a number of difficult years, but from the Covid-19 pandemic.

While the conference’s overarching theme was to debate where the industry – and in turn, South African cities, provinces and the country as a whole – stood in terms of a united vision to successfully plan a track towards 2050, the event also looked to reignite a spirit of collaboration between the private and public sectors.

Said Deon van Zyl, chairperson of the Western Cape Property Development Forum (WCPDF): “We must find a way around the stalemates and standoffs that currently exist between these two sectors and find best-practice examples of public-private partnerships to learn from and move forward as quickly as possible.

“Otherwise, we will find not only our industry but the roll out of our country’s infrastructure past the point of return.”

Reflecting back on the conference, Van Zyl pinpointed four factors that would be key to both economic recovery and the establishment of a united vision.

GET THE “TOWN” TO TALK

Sharing from his own experience following a period spent in Seattle in the USA, Professor Nick Binedell of the University of Pretoria’s Gordon Institute of Business Science, and a keynote speaker at the conference, had spoken about the importance of “town talk”. This referred to the crucial engagement between citizens, city officials and in particular politicians in “round table” discussions during which all levels of engagement could begin to understand the challenges of creating a vision from all angles.

“The success of something like a ‘town talk’ lies in the fact that politicians do not join the discussion to talk; they join to listen, noted Van Zyl. “Something we have yet to get right in South Africa.”

Bringing it into an African context, Van Zyl observed that this is what Rwanda set out to do in 2000 when it established its own – to date, very successful – Vision 2020, the purpose of which defined and relatively simple deliverables .

“But even before Rwanda’s Vision 2020 was penned, President Paul Kagame and his team spent two years going from village to village, just to listen – to ‘town talk’,” said Van Zyl. “And I think we must begin having

our own ‘town talk’ conversations here in South Africa, ensuring that there a fair opportunity for people not necessarily to speak, but to listen in a safe environment.”

Commenting on the refreshingly open and frank debates held during the two-day “Vision for Growth event, particularly by participating panelists from local municipal level, Van Zyl said: “On the one hand, I found it quite sad but on the other encouraging that through this event we have probably, for the first time, had our own first ‘town talk’ about Cape Town.”

Again referring to Rwanda, Van Zyl said: “The purpose of a vision is to be a guiding principle for everybody, whether you are sitting in government, or you are a politician or whether you’re a business person or a member of some of the poorest communities, every person should understand what the vision is. And it needs to be a simple one.

“If our vision in South Africa is not as simple as saying: ‘We will make sure that we have enough money to put shoes on every child’s feet, allow them to go to school, eradicate pit latrines, give everyone access to water and electricity, and make sure that the system works for everybody,’ then we haven’t started. And at the moment, unfortunately, we’ve got to acknowledge that the system’s not working.”

ERADICATE SILOISM

A second theme that came through strongly during the two-day event was the culture of what Van Zyl termed as “silos” – or the tendency for most government departments across all tiers to work in isolation and the urgent need for this to stop, having been identified as among the greatest barriers to approval of developments – even within the public sector itself.

However, there were instances where the walls had been broken down, not least of which was demonstrated during the conference by Lekha Allopi, Project Executive – Development Planning, eThekweni Municipality.

A highlight of the conference for many of the delegates from both the private and public sector, Allopi discussed the success eThekweni had delivered in setting up a viable system between the City’s Department of Development Planning, other City departments and local developers, enabling applications to be processed swiftly. Equally important, the system was able to identify problems in applications early on, with only the most appropriate for the City and its vision overall to be allowed to proceed.

“There are many excuses around the reasons why silos exist, in the first place,” noted Van Zyl. “However, eThekweni is an excellent example of a municipality that has moved beyond this and has gotten its own silos to talk to each other and work together. And that is exciting for the rest of the country to learn from.”

GIVE GOVERNMENT OFFICIALS A VOICE

Complementary to the idea of a “town talk”, Van Zyl also felt it was import to create environments where executive government officials were also given an opportunity to speak their mind.

“We seem to have created a culture, certainly in the Western Cape, where only politicians – be that at Provincial or Local Authority level – are allowed to express an opinion. I think it’s time to allow the technocrats to tell you their bit, and thereby become accountable to the people who pay their salaries.”

He also believed it was essential for junior officials to receive constant guidance from their senior officials: “It has been our experience that an overall corporate culture is not filtering down to those staff members manning the desks and deciding on applications. We may, as an industry, be receiving the buy-in around

collaboration from officials at the top, but that message to cooperate in a spirit of collaboration is certainly not reaching the levels where we interact with junior officials.”

His one criticism of the two-day event, noted Van Zyl, revolved around this very point, with delegates from the public sector making up only 17% of all attendees and politicians 1%. “At least a third of the audience should, in fact, be politicians – here to listen.”

As the conference had been a “reaching out” towards government, Van Zyl said: “I would have liked to have seen at least a third of all delegates from public sector representation. Unfortunately, the red tape and the bureaucracy for officials to attend and participate in events such as these are just too laborious in the Western Cape, and we have to address that.

CONTINUE TO UNITE AND BRING LABOUR TO THE TABLE

Van Zyl also expressed his excitement about the fact that industry was starting to unite beyond structures created by Government for its own purposes. The WCPDF, for example had been a founding member of the Construction Alliance South Africa (CASA), which united 33 industry bodies into a single voice under the leadership of John Mathews, immediate past President of Master Builders South Africa and currently the CEO of Western Cape-based Garden Cities.

“Building relationships and friendships in industry are now priorities to get industry’s voice heard,” stressed Van Zyl. “We can no longer only depend on government-created platforms to be the voice of industry.”

It was therefore also imperative for bodies representing the industry to embrace their labour counterparts and ensure the organisations that represented the workforce on the ground were included in all discussions, especially around policy formation.

“Creating a vision for our industry means creating jobs for some of the poorest members of our communities,” noted Van Zyl. “And I am reminded of the rallying cry of many groupings over the decades: ‘Nothing about us, without us’.

“No policy should be decided without the full representation from all members of an industry, and that includes the property development and construction industry.”

ENDS

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