

Slumlord, Transnet, accused of prioritising profit over human rights



A sewage flooded yard.



Large potholes in the roads.



Rising sewage in a drain outside a home, after the occupant has flushed.



The houses are constructed with crumbling asbestos, a health hazard to the residents and their children.

Estella Naicker

ROUGHLY two hundred Vryheid residents and their families fear that they could be left homeless once the sale of land, currently owned by Public Works, to Transnet, has been concluded.

Operating in a manner similar to slumlords, Transnet’s property division have allowed the living conditions in the houses occupying the area referred to as Hardytown and Parkville to deteriorate to such an extent that one has to ask, “What landlord with any conscience could continue to collect rent from tenants living in such squalor?”

The once neat, well-maintained houses, accommodating Transnet’s white employees exclusively, prior to the 90’s, are now home to poor, and working class black people. Some of the residents are still employees of Transnet, some are former employees who are now on pension, and some are family members of former Transnet employees who have passed on.

The houses are made of crumbling asbestos, ceilings are caving in due to the extensive rusting of the roofs, the roads are pocked with massive potholes, and the yards swamped with raw sewage.

Sifiso Zungu, the secretary of the community organisation that is fighting for the land to be donated to AbaQulusi Municipality, has provided a brief history of the area.

According to Mr Zungu, Transnet entered into a long term lease agreement with Public Works in the 1960’s, during the construction of the railway line through Vryheid.

“The houses on the land were constructed by Transnet and were intended to temporarily accommodate the workers who were busy with the railway line. I believe that the lifespan of the houses were supposed to be five-

years,” began Mr Zungu.

“However, once the railway line had been built, Transnet continued to accommodate its white employees in the houses. Black employees were accommodated in a hostel. During that time, Transnet still inspected the area and ensured that everything was well-kept and that the grass in the open spaces was neat and cut. In the 90’s the residents of Harytown and Parkville were moved into houses in town, the hostel accommodating black staff was demolished and the residents of the hostel were moved to Hardytown and Parkville. At the time, the risk of asbestos housing was not properly understood, nor was it mentioned to us.

“Since South Africa became a democracy, the houses have not received any attention and they are now unliveable. Everything needs to be repaired. You flush your toilet, and your yard floods with sewage. The roads are terrible. The street lights haven’t worked for years and the grass in the open spaces is so overgrown that it creates a haven for criminals.”

Simon Mtshali, a retired tractor driver of Transnet’s, says he has been paying his rent, and the annual increases, diligently for 34 years. His badly damaged roof has created problems for him since the storm of 2000, but nothing has been done.

Duduzile Khubeka flushes her toilet to demonstrate what happens. Soon after she flushes, raw sewage bubbles up from out of a drain next to her house and floods her yard.

“I went to the municipality to ask for help, they said the problem is on private property so I should speak to Transnet. Transnet told me to speak to the municipality. I contacted a private plumber for help, but he quoted me more than I will ever be able to afford,” said Mrs Khubeka.

Mr Zungu remains optimistic, “This is home to us. I grew up

here. This place has been the only home I have known. I accept and understand that living here has its burdens, but I believe I have to be the change I want to see. I want to see better roads. I want to see better living conditions. I want people to acknowledge that we are humans and should be allowed to live as such. I am a believer. I believe that if we push hard and we strategise, we can make a difference.”

Mr Zungu has written a proposal to the Department of Public Works to have the land donated to AbaQulusi Municipality. “If the land that the houses are on, is donated to the municipality instead of sold to Transnet, we can divide the land into plots. Those who can afford their own homes can then buy the land and rebuild decent structures. We can apply to provincial government for funding for low cost housing for those who cannot afford it, and in doing so establish a mixed use settlement,” he explained.

Sadly, if what municipal manager, Bonga Ntanz, says is true, Mr Zungu’s dream will never come to fruition.

“I had hoped that we could help the people of Hardytown, but when I attended a meeting between Public Works and Transnet, it was like a bomb had dropped on me. They informed us that the negotiations between Public Works and Transnet had reached a stage where it would be impossible for us to intervene. It closed the door to ever having the land donated to the municipality. The conditions that these people are living in are immoral and unethical. They are prioritising profit over human rights, but there is nothing we can do,” said Mr Ntanz.

Mr Zungu fears that once the sale of land goes through, the residents of Hardytown will be evicted altogether.

Transnet has ignored our requests for comment.



Above: An area where some of the houses were demolished due to being a health hazard. Left: Sifiso Zungu hopes to be an agent of change to improve the living conditions of the residents in Hardytown and Parkville.

