

Fresh start for old building

Local airsoft group takes over vacant city building

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AN abandoned government building in Mayors Walk that had been housing vagrants and used as an escape route for opportunistic criminals, has been taken over by a local airsoft group.

Ronaldo Fourie founded his airsoft company, Scarlett Tactical, in 2009, after leaving the police force in the early 2000s.

He and his team, with the support of the local community started cleaning the building a month ago, ridding the property of vagrants, which many believe has led to a decrease in crime levels in the area.

The large two-storey building in Mayor's Walk Road was said to be a hostel before it was turned into the Camperdown Circuit Office for the Department of Education.

The building was abandoned again, however, and vagrants began moving in and according to local residents, started stripping the building of any metal that could be found.

Hayfields Mills Circle Neighbourhood Watch chairperson, Lester Bradley, who works near the abandoned building said with the vagrants came the opportunistic crimes. He said there had been reports of house breakings as well as muggings of residents and domestic workers walking along the street.

The vacant building appeared in an article in *The Witness* in December last year which highlighted vagrancy and vandalism issues.

There had initially been confusion about who was responsible for the building, but the Department of Public Works said it was "allocated" to the Office of the Premier.

However, Fourie and his team saw potential in the abandoned building as an airsoft venue, and he began the process of clearing vagrants from the building and removing all the rubbish from the passageways and rooms.

Fourie said they funded the cleaning of the building and spent around R1 000 on petrol just to cut the overgrown grass surrounding the property.

One community member, Chris Stanford, said although the airsoft team had been at the building for just a month, crime in the area had "dropped dramatically".

"The vagrants know the team is working on the building but they never know when they will be there so they just stay away," he said.

Fourie said he had hired a young man who had been living on the streets to look after the property at night and keep vagrants away.

Another resident, Mike Selby agreed with Stanford and said the area had quietened down almost completely following Scarlett Tactical's cleaning up of the building.

Bradley added that there had been a very positive response to Fourie's project and that he was happy they could use the building for their game as well as to push the criminal elements out of the neighbourhood.

"In the past month there have been no beggars at the robots, no vagrants in the buildings, and I have had no reports of any crime taking place on the road."

Anesh Lutchman, who lives across the road from the building, was quoted in December's article saying he had been at work one day when his wife called to tell him there were people in their yard.

He said the trespassers left without taking anything but added it was "really



The main entrance to the vacant building on Howard Road in Mayor's Walk which an Airsoft Community recently started using, bringing crime levels down in the area dramatically. **PHOTOS: IAN CARBUTT**

scary" as he felt once the vagrants had stripped the abandoned building completely, they would move on to burgling nearby houses.

Lutchman, yesterday told *Weekend Witness* there were still issues with crime in the area.

He said he was mugged last week while walking down his street.

He said he appreciated Fourie's presence but doubted the area would ever be completely crime-free unless police worked with the private entity.

He said eight months ago, police had patrolled the area day and night which

had helped significantly with crime but had stopped all of a sudden.

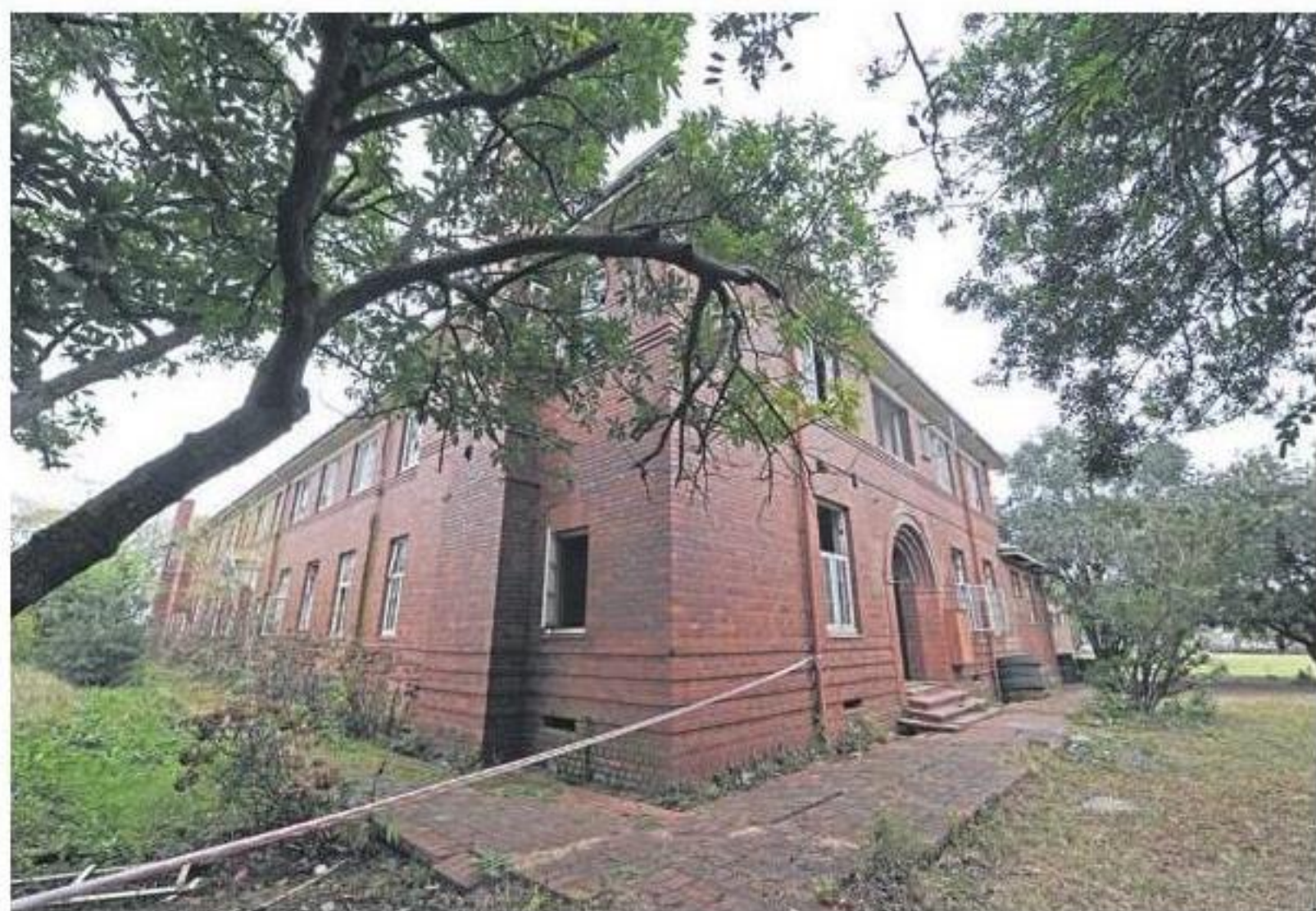
Police spokesperson Sergeant Mthokozisi Ngobese said police continue to patrol the area and had not disappeared as Lutchman alleged.

Spokesperson for the Office of the Premier, Thami Ngidi said initiatives such as Fourie's were encouraged and if more people took similar initiatives, the province "would be a better place".

He said it was good to hear that the public was taking ownership of public places and trying to clean up and stop crime.

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ABOVE: A dilapidated room in the vacant building. **LEFT:** Ronaldo Fourie said holes were made in the ceiling and floors of the vacant building by vagrants so they could steal pipes and wiring.



FROM LEFT: Ronaldo Fourie with Mayor's Walk residents Chris Stanford and Mike Selby haul a large bag filled with rubble and waste from the vacant building that had been housing opportunistic criminals.



A bird's eye view of the court yard, sporting a single bag, filled to the brim with rubbish.

AIRSOFT GUNS DON'T HARM PEOPLE OR ANIMALS

AIRSOFT is similar to paintball and although it has a similar sounding name to an air rifle (pellet gun), the two are completely different.

"Airsoft guns are non-lethal in nature. They are used in a sport where

people shoot at each other, similar in nature to paintball," Fourie said.

"When you get hit it feels a little like a bee sting. If members use a metal pellet they will be charged for assault amongst other charges. Even

though our guns operate on air similar to that of an air rifle, we cannot harm any animals or people with it."

He said air rifles, however, were a different story.

"Air rifles are developed for target

shooting and hunting.

"They operate at a much higher FPS [feet per second] and Joule [kinetic energy] rating to be able to do what they need to."

— Weekend Witness Reporter.