



Publication: Financial Mail - Inside
Title: MEANDERING INTO DISREPAIR
Publish date: 01 Jun 2023
Page: 34

Reach: 13890
AVE:R 82302.42
Author: Angus Begg

MEANDERING INTO DISREPAIR

The roads of KwaZulu-Natal's picturesque Midlands Meander are in a parlous state, seemingly as a result of provincial authorities' inaction, according to residents. Local government is stepping up to fill the gap

Angus Begg

A drive through one of South Africa's mostly widely recognised tourist routes presents a sorry sight. The picturesque Midlands Meander in KwaZulu-Natal (KZN) is blighted by decaying roads and overgrown verges of grass and weeds have rooted themselves in the tar. Potholes are as pervasive as in Joburg.

"How many hours have you got?" asks Missy Hughes, head of Nottingham Road nonprofit Love Notties, when asked about the route. "Potholes, no lines, no cats' eyes. Throw in rain and mist, [and] heavy-duty trucks, no road shoulder."

It's a disaster in the making, says tourism operator Bradley Bouwer. In March, he came over a blind rise to find four women stranded on the side of the road. Their car had hit a pothole, leaving "the tyres shredded, completely disintegrated and the rim buckled", he says. "[The road] is an absolute death trap."

Speak to other locals, and they'll tell similar stories.

"The Midlands Meander roads have steadily deteriorated over the past 15 years," Nottingham Road Land Owners' Association chair Clive Foss tells the FM. "The decline of district and tar roads has been consistent."

He refers, in particular, to the narrow R103 linking Mooi River to Curry's Post, and the R617 between Howick and Lotheni in the Drakensberg – both of which fall under the ambit of the provincial department of transport (DoT). "Only crisis maintenance takes place," he says.

uMngeni mayor Chris Pappas, too, cites these two roads as being in urgent need of repair. But with the province falling short on maintaining this key

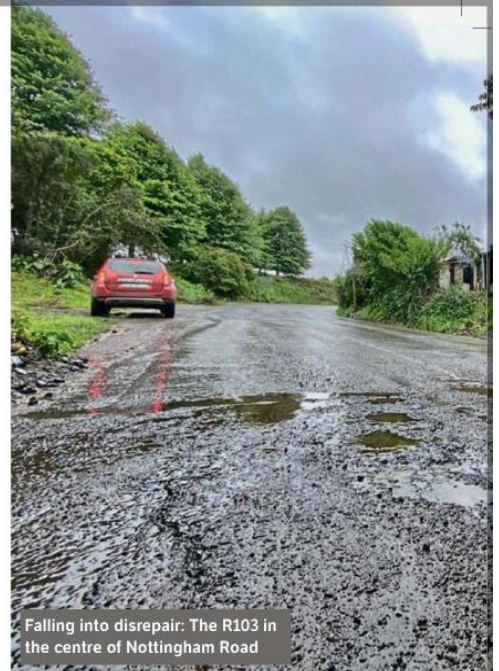
infrastructure, municipal staff are stepping into the breach, he says.

As locals feel the pinch of forgone business, they're getting involved too. In March, residents and businesses themselves filled some of the hazardous potholes on the R103, says uMngeni deputy mayor Sandile Mnikathi.

The degradation of provincial roads is no small matter in an area dependent on tourism and agriculture. Tourism businesses alone contribute R151m to the municipality's GDP, according to a 2022 study commissioned by uMngeni Tourism. That report found the sector accounted for about 3,000 positions a year in uMngeni, including permanent, temporary and voluntary positions; direct employment was estimated conservatively at just over 500 jobs.

As Pappas explains, the Meander was established as a network of roads offering travellers easy access to tourist attractions, and connecting accommodation establishments to crafters such as Ardmore Ceramics, Tsonga Shoes and Nottingham Road Brewery.

"People come on holiday here for various reasons," he says. "Beyond relaxing they come here to drive the



Falling into disrepair: The R103 in the centre of Nottingham Road

Meander, visiting these attractions."

As far as agriculture is concerned, Kevin Barnsley, a farmer and chair of the Howick District Landowners Association, tells the FM the R103 is essential to the successful commercial functioning of the Midlands. "Roads are like blood vessels and arteries and veins, in and out – input getting to us, and produce going out [to market]," he says.

Part of the problem is that articulated trucks – particularly those carrying timber – use the R103 to avoid paying tolls on the N3. "These trucks end up 'digging' ditches into the side of the roads," says Pappas.

While there's no law against the trucks using these roads, it's a problem, says Foss, because the roads were built in the 1950s and 1960s and the trucks today are bigger and wider – and carry heavier loads.

There's no doubt that violence against truckers on the national road between Joburg and eThekweni plays a role in the turn to alternative routes. Then there's the collapse of South Africa's rail network, and resultant turn



Photographs courtesy of Clive Foss

'Death trap': Potholes on the R103 pose a danger to lives

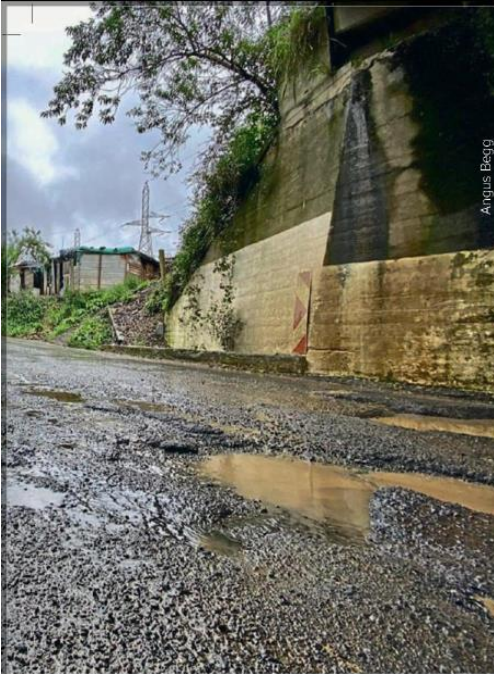


Transport MEC Siphso Hlomuka: 'We are strengthening technology to strengthen security'



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to trucking to move freight. As Bob Hoole, a consultant and former chair of the Howick Districts Landowners Association, tells it: "We used to get up to 30 trains a day coming through the Midlands Meander on a 24-hour basis. If we get 10 a day [now], it's a lot."

Uzimaleni Taxi Association chair Joe Gwamanda has been driving the Midlands roads for more than 30 years. "These roads are bad. They've been getting worse for a long time," he says. "I know so many people – it must be more than 20 – who broke tyres and rims on these roads. We tried to fill holes with sand and cement, that's how desperate we are."

"Sometimes we see the [DoT] sends people to put old tar in the holes. In two months it's a hole again."

It's not as though the provincial authorities have done nothing. uMngeni Tourism Board chair JP Prinsloo tells the FM that the provincial department has been addressing "additional unplanned potholes" resulting from recent heavy rains in the province.

Bouwer tells the FM that the authority started fixing sections of the road "a year or more ago", which worked well. "But then it just stopped, somewhere near Lidgetton."

A number of locals canvassed by the FM also express concerns about the contractors employed by the provincial department. Until recently, Mnikathi says, the DoT had a maintenance contract with a company that was "seemingly incompetent in doing the work".

Of contractors brought in under the expanded public works programme, Hoole says: "They lack the correct tools and are not managed when attempting to clear road verges under Armco barriers, roadside drainage areas and so on. If they achieve 15m a day among a team of 12 people, that would be an over-achievement."

There are also concerns about the awarding of contracts, as well as outright criminality. Foss, for one, worries that winning bidders "may not have the money for the equipment for the tender".

The construction mafia so active elsewhere in South Africa seems alive and well in the Midlands too. In his telling, there are "vigilante groups who demand that recruitment for successful tenderers goes through them".

Getting to the bottom of the issue – never mind resolving it – would seem to be hampered by a lack of responsiveness on the part of the relevant authorities.

Pappas, for example, says he was "assured" by the provincial DoT in February that a contractor would be appointed to repair the roads most in need. But months later, he tells the FM he has "not seen any evidence of this".

These roads are bad. They've been getting worse for a long time ... We tried to fill holes with sand and cement, that's how desperate we are

Joe Gwamanda

Hoole, too, tells how attempts to engage around road repairs and maintenance have received no response, "especially in the past 18 months".

Asked for his view, Sanral eastern region manager Dumisani Nkabinde tells the FM "feeder routes [such as the R103 and R617] provide an important aspect of a road network".

But pressed about the deteriorating state of the R103, Nkabinde says he doesn't "have proper knowledge of its condition".

Instead, he directs the FM to the provincial DoT, telling the FM Sanral has regular contact with the department – along with port authorities and municipalities – "to discuss how the road network performs". The KZN DoT, he says, "would be best placed to give parameters of its condition".

Only, this doesn't prove to be the case either. Months after KZN transport MEC Siphon Hlomuka's spokesperson assured the FM that "a response will be submitted today", the FM is still waiting.

And it's not just the FM: Mnikathi says he, too, has found it impossible to get a response from Hlomuka.

KZN Agricultural Union chair Sandy la Marque is also critical of "the lack of communication and consultation with all communities to bring about accountability and ensure the critical routes are repaired and maintained".

Official bodies, she says, seem to have largely given up on the province's ability to look after its roads.

It's not as if there's a shortage of ideas on how to fix the situation. Pappas, for example, points to Sanral as being key to the resolution of the issue – particularly its plan for the N3 toll route from Estcourt to Pietermaritzburg.

While Sanral has allocated funds to upgrade the N3, and hopefully alleviate the pressure somewhat, Pappas says he'd "like to see them giving back to the surrounding infrastructure".

Hoole agrees the N3 is key. The R103 feeds into the N3 at the Mooi River toll plaza, but only trucks on the N3 itself are forced through the weighbridge. He's of the view that the entrance and exit could be reconfigured to make it compulsory for any truck over 8t to travel through the weighbridge. That would mean trucks pay tolls regardless of which route they take.

He also believes the introduction of traffic-calming measures and regular vehicle checks along the route would discourage trucks from using the R103.

Until something is done, however, the road will likely remain a death trap. "If you drive into [a pothole] in a small car, it's game over," says Bouwer. ✘



Local fix: Residents have taken it on themselves to repair potholes



Little maintenance: Authorities seem to be doing little to maintain routes such as the R103