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SYMBOL OF HOPE

Residents embrace their stadium

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A COMBINED effort by soccer lovers and community leaders reopened the R112 million Fezile Dabi stadium which had become a haven for drug users. The 15 000-seater stadium in Tumahole, Parys, was vandalised and had cables stolen while residents and soccer lovers watched it fall into ruin.

A community leader, who took a stand in making sure the stadium was being put to good use, Prince Zina, said he was glad that the matter was getting media attention.

Zina said community members and the local sports fraternity were not interested in the politics of the day but they wanted the stadium to be operational.

"All that we are interested in is to see the stadium being handed over to the community, and this matter is no longer about the stadium, but many other projects that were left unattended to.

"We are now engaging with the provincial department of sports and currently they have sent their technical adviser to inspect the damage on the site," he said.

Zina, however, said he was saddened by the lack of an interest from the Ngwathe local municipality.

"Our municipality told us point-blank that they don't want to be involved. For now, we are told Fezile Dabi district municipality would oversee the stadium, so we set up the appointment with the municipality."

Zina said the government had spent a lot of money on the stadium just for it to lie idle, without the beneficiaries enjoying it.

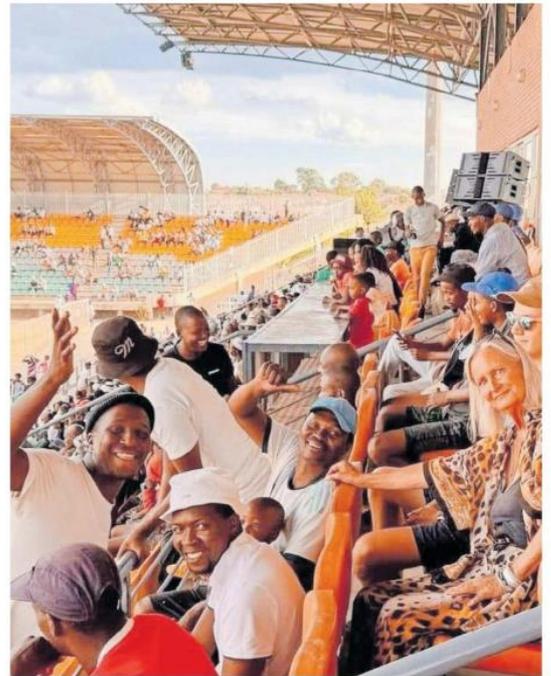
When Independent Media contacted Ngwathe Municipality's spokesperson, Steve Naale, he said the stadium had not yet been handed



PRINCE Zina and community members replace broken and stolen palisades at the stadium.



NEWLY cleaned stands.



RESIDENTS enjoy a football game at the Fezile Dabi stadium in Tumahole, Parys. PICTURES: SUPPLIED

over to the municipality, referring the newspaper to both public works and the department of sports.

"The stadium has not yet been handed over to us.

"As far as I know it still falls under public works.

"I would suggest you guys contact public works or the sports department," Naale said.

Public Works spokesperson Mlungisi Maqubela said the facility had been handed over to the sports department, adding that once that handover process had been done, everything else was the responsibility of the department.

"The stadium was handed over to the department of sports, arts and culture in November of 2021. That's all we can respond to as public works," Maqubela said.

He said the department's role was to service other departments with such

services as building infrastructure, but it did not maintain those buildings.

"We build schools for the department of educations, and they do their allocations and make arrangements from within in order to do their maintenance. We call these capital projects."

Maqubela said the fact that the stadium was built by the department did not mean that public works would forever assume responsibility for it.

Attempts to get comment from the department of sports were unsuccessful at the time of going to print.

Meanwhile, another community leader, Fundile Mlambo, applauded community members who ensured that Fezile Dabi stadium did not remain a white elephant within Tumahole. Mlambo said this showed the community's commitment to blowing life into the stadium.

Mlambo said: "For many years the community has been lied to by either the relevant department/s, including the local municipality, in regard to the opening and full operation of the stadium. Now, that the stadium has partially been unofficially opened by the community, relevant government departments (of Sports, Arts & Culture, Public Works, and the Ngwathe Local Municipality and the Fezile Dabi District Municipality) must come on board together with the community of Tumahole to ensure that the running of the stadium is efficient.

"An interim stadium committee should be appointed which should be reflective of all stakeholders within Tumahole, especially representatives from the sports fraternity and non-profit organisations."

Mlambo said the stadium had the potential to create jobs in the com-

munity, but the community should guard against opportunistic political parties that would want to use the stadium issues to advance their political agendas.

He said the success of the Fezile Dabi stadium relied on the unity of the Tumahole community, and that there should be transparency.

The initial cost of the stadium was set to be R98m.

The stadium was officially opened by the province's former premier, Ace Magashule, on November 28, 2013.

In 2021, despite its white elephant status, R3.3m was spent - not on fixing the stadium - but on a statue to honour the late anti-apartheid stalwart, Fezile Dabi.

Former Free State Sports, Arts, Culture and Recreation MEC Limakatso Mahasa unveiled the statue at the neglected stadium.