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# Operation save St George's Park

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Bay residents slowly breathing new life into city's former pride and joy after years of neglect

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Taking matters into their own hands, Nelson Mandela Bay residents are breathing new life into St George's Park, which has been overgrown, neglected and overtaken by vagrants in recent years.

What began with simply trimming overgrown bushes and trees has grown into an initiative that could result in the 160-year-old park being restored to its former glory.

Thanks to the efforts of the Friends of St George's Park nonprofit in bringing businesses and the Nelson Mandela Bay municipality together, the park is once again starting to become an attraction for locals and tourists.

"The plan is to revamp the assets that are already there, and to bring people back to the park." Friends of St George's Park operations manager John Whitfield said.

"We've allowed it to fall into the wrong hands, and now it is time to reclaim it and breathe new life into it."

In just a few months of cleaning up facilities, walkways and gardens, interest in the park has grown, and a string of future plans to increase activities there have sprouted.

The project started in March last year, when Whitfield partnered with the MES homeless shelter to expand their programme of clearing overgrown vegetation in the park.

At that stage, the shelter had

**MAKING PROGRESS:** The Friends of St George's Park NPO is slowly reviving one of the city's oldest attractions. NPO members Penny Mowbray, left, Andre Theron and Sally Anderson discuss their plans outside the Pearson Conservatory  
Picture: RIAAN MARAIS



already approached the ward councillor to assist with cleaning up around the small cemetery in the park, which had become a haven for vagrants and criminals.

"We then brought in a tree feller who helped clear more vegetation towards the Port Elizabeth Lawn Tennis Club.

"And when some of the local businesses around the park saw something happening, they wanted to get involved.

"Some wanted to contribute funds, while others simply started cleaning up outside their own buildings," Whitfield said.

Soon more residents became involved and several

businesses wanted to contribute to the rejuvenation of the park, leading to the Friends of St George's Park becoming a registered NPO in November.

Private individuals and businesses now pay a monthly fee to the organisation, which allocates the funds as needed for the various projects.

"By clearing the vegetation and improving visibility, we hope to see fewer vagrants, and some of the ills that come with that, such as drug abuse and crime.

"And by incorporating MES into the project, we also see the enrichment and development of some of the city's downtown residents."

Municipal spokesperson Mamele Ndamase said officials were aware of the initiative and the city was happy to be on board with some of the projects.

"We are assisting in terms of transportation and removal of the cut excess vegetation, as well as the removal of debris from the park.

"Our teams, with the help of the expanded public works programme (EPWP) participants, are also on the ground doing maintenance work," she said.

Ndamase said the municipality acknowledged the problems caused by vagrants who had invaded the park, and municipal safety and security personnel were on the ground to assist in this regard.

"One of the initiatives we are looking at as the municipality is the introduction of park wardens through the EPWP programme to increase visibility in the park."

She said resources were unfortunately limited, and so the municipality was excited to join hands with the Friends of St George's Park to reclaim the park and realise its potential.

Another NPO member, Sally Anderson, has liaised with officials of the Park Run programme, and a weekly 5km fun run through St George's Park is set to start in March.

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"We scouted a route that will make use of various paths and walkways across the 73ha park.

"Not only will it bring more people to the park to increase positive activity, but it provides people from all walks of life with a healthy outdoor activity on a Saturday morning," Anderson said.

Meanwhile, NPO member Penny Mowbray is leading the charge to revamp the Pearson Conservatory, as the 140-year-old greenhouse has fallen into a state of disrepair in recent years.

Besides contributing funds towards the NPO's projects, some businesses have allowed their employees to take extended lunch breaks, provided they spend them in the park and keep their eyes and ears open for any unwanted activity.

Another business sponsored its employees' membership of the PE Lawn Tennis Club, one of the oldest sports clubs in the country.

"We also saw people organise end-of-year staff functions at one of the bowls clubs in the park, contributing to their rev-

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# Operation save St George's Park gathers momentum

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venue as well," Whitfield said.  
He said the historic Mannville open air theatre had been cleaned up and the Friends of St George's Park hoped shows would take place there again.  
Future projects included ensuring the provision of additional lighting and security throughout the park, as well as installing security cameras, deploying guards and staging patrols at strategic locations.  
St George's resident and real estate agent Andre Theron said the activity in and around the park was translating into an economic revival of the area.  
"The interest from people to buy property around St George's has increased significantly since news of the NPO started spreading on social media.  
"Properties are selling faster and prices are steadily increasing as well.  
"We believe this is a direct knock-on effect from the cleanup of the park."  
Ward 3 councillor David Hayselden said the work being



**BIG CLEANUP:** One of the first initiatives is to cut back overgrown vegetation in the park to improve visibility and increase security. Private contractor Simba Mbiza loads tree stumps onto a truck while members of the Friends of St George's Park NPO discuss the progress of their projects Picture: RIAAN MARRAIS

done by the Friends of St George's Park NPO was boosting his ward and the city.  
"These people are truly putting their time and money where their mouth is.  
"This is a golden opportunity to take back what has been stolen by vagrants and criminals," Hayselden said.

"By cutting back the vegetation and improving visibility, they have effectively destroyed the hiding spots frequented by these unwelcome elements, and I applaud them for it."  
The NPO had informed him of its future plans and he would support it in any way he could, Hayselden said.

"We are also grateful for the support from the municipality in assisting with the cleanup operations, and I hope to see this partnership grow stronger and [that] we can rely on more support from the city to improve the situation."

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