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The Welisizwe Rural Henley Dam Bridge was opened on Friday. **Photo: Supplied**

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The South African National Defence Force's Army Engineer Corps has completed a vital new bridge at Henley Dam, Pietermaritzburg, two years after devastating floods claimed lives and cut off communities.

The long-awaited 42-metre, five-ton Bailey Bridge was officially opened on Friday, marking a milestone in efforts to ensure safe crossings for residents.

The R17 million project forms part of the Welisizwe Rural Bridges Programme and was undertaken in collaboration with the Department of Public Works and Infrastructure and the Department of Transport. The floods of 2022 left tragedy in their wake, with residents dying while trying to cross the swollen river to reach the Pietermaritzburg city centre.

The new bridge, prioritised under the programme, is intended to prevent further loss of life and to provide safer, more accessible routes for pupils and surrounding communities.

Department of Transport and Human Settlement MEC Siboniso Duma, who opened the bridge, said the project had created jobs

and improved livelihoods. "We are pleased to hear that the community is happy about this bridge. They have started using it," said Duma.

He urged residents to safeguard the infrastructure.

"We want to urge them to protect it. A bridge is a means and source of interaction," he said.

Msunduzi Municipality Deputy Mayor Mxolisi Mkhize said the bridge would ease fears during the rainy season.

"There will be interaction between the old Henley and the new one. It will greatly improve safety and access for residents.

"They will also be able to take a shorter route when going to town," said Mkhize.

Ward councillor Mlungisi Zondi said he was relieved the bridge had finally been delivered after years of tragedy.

"So many lives have been lost here, now they are going to be saved. We are concerned about trucks carrying building material passing here and ignoring signs that indicate they are not allowed to use this bridge," Zondi said.

He added that such behaviour could cause setbacks for the community.