

Publication: Letaba Herald - Main

Title: Disrepair forces trucks onto R71

Publish date: 25 Jul 2025

Page: 1

Reach: 12000

AVE: R 31754.86

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Disrepair forces trucks onto R71

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Truck drivers are increasingly being forced into life-threatening decisions, choosing between the crumbling George's Valley road (R528) and the hazardous, truck-restricted Magoebaskloof R71 pass.

This ongoing dilemma was tragically underscored last week when a gas delivery truck exploded on the R71 following a suspected brake failure.

The driver, reportedly transporting gas cylinders, lost control while descending the steep and winding Magoebaskloof pass, ultimately leaping from the truck moments before a violent explosion rocked the area near the Magoebaskloof Mountain Lodge.

According to eyewitnesses, the fiery blast was preceded by the sound of screeching brakes, followed by a loud bang.

No fatalities were reported, but the incident has reignited urgent calls for road safety reform.

Despite the R71 displaying clear signage prohibiting vehicles over eight tons, truck drivers are increasingly using it as an alternative to the George's Valley road, which has deteriorated into a pothole-riddled hazard zone.

André Moss of the Freedom Front Plus (FF Plus) says the situation is a clear result of government neglect.

"That road is completely riddled with potholes. It's unsafe not just for trucks, but for any motorist," Moss stated. "We've seen a pattern where truck drivers now routinely avoid George's Valley and instead take their chances on the R71, despite the weight restrictions."

Moss confirmed that the party will be writing to the Limpopo Department of Public Works, Roads and Infrastructure, demanding that the George's Valley route be urgently repaired.

"The department must take responsibility

and fix the road before we witness more tragedies," he said.

He also highlighted the legal and safety risks of using the R71, stating that its steep gradient and narrow bends were never designed to accommodate heavy-duty vehicles.

"Drivers are pushed into this situation due to a lack of infrastructure maintenance," Moss added.

His concerns were echoed by local road users. One Tzaneen motorist described the daily terror of sharing the road with trucks on the R71.

"You hold your breath when you see one of those massive trucks coming downhill. It's only a matter of time before we have another disaster."

Brake system specialist and diesel mechanic Peter Pilusa told the Herald that many truck drivers rely solely on service brakes when descending the pass instead of using engine retarders or lower gears, leading to overheating and eventual brake failure, a condition known as brake fade.

"Proper pre-trip inspections and using the correct descent techniques could prevent many of these accidents," Pilusa said.

Following the Magoebaskloof incident on July 16, DA Limpopo spokesperson for Public Works, Roads and Infrastructure, Marie Helm, issued a formal request to MEC Ernest Racheo to prioritise the resurfacing of George's Valley road.

"Hardly a week goes by without a serious incident on the R71," Helm stated.

"If the George's Valley road were in good condition, heavy vehicles and trucks carrying hazardous goods would not need to risk the dangerous Magoebaskloof pass."

Spokesperson of Public Works, Roads and Infrastructure Emmanuel Mongwe and Transport and Community Safety Moremi Taueatsoala did not respond to requests for comment at the time of print on Tuesday.

RESIDENTS HAVE THEIR SAY

Residents were very vocal in a Facebook poll on what should be done about the R71 road.

BYRON HENNING: "Truck height/width restrictors could be installed on both ends of the pass, together with CCTV and number plate recognition system for monitoring and enforcement."

WAYNE KURTEN: "For starters, George's Valley must be resurfaced, then there must be a timeline for all essential delivery vehicles to clients in the pass (such as) logging operators however, permits must be issued so that it is controlled.... All other heavy vehicles over 8 ton must go via the Polokwane-Mooketsi route. Vehicle owners, operators, and drivers must be arrested and face heavy fines and vehicles and cargo impounded if they don't comply! There must be no relaxation of this rule, and it must be enforced to the letter of the law. We are going to see mass carnage and loss of innocent lives on the Magoebaskloof R71 pass if something is not enforced."

LIZ MCGAFFIN: "We have to give them a break! George's Valley alternative is a total deathtrap for heavy-duty (vehicles)! R71 is a Sanral road, not regional. But those that can go via Mooketsi in meantime, make it mandatory for all heavy-duty (vehicles) to stop before heading down the kloof."