

Publication: Daily Dispatch - Main

Title: Sarah Baartman Centre of Remembrance back on track after decade of delays

Publish date: 07 Jul 2026

Page: 2

Reach: 10889

AVE: R 22145.90

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Sarah Baartman Centre of Remembrance back on track after decade of delays

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After more than a decade of delays, the R188m Sarah Baartman Centre of Remembrance project took a major step forward on Saturday when public works & infrastructure minister Dean Macpherson officially handed the site over for construction.

Macpherson identified the centre in 2025 as one of his department's 10 failed priority projects requiring urgent intervention after years of missed deadlines.

The site, long quiet, was alive with the sound of machinery and construction workers on Saturday.

Macpherson joined in the action, receiving a quick lesson in operating a tractor-loader-backhoe and laying bricks, joking the experience would prove useful when he tackled that kitchen extension at home.

He was joined by Kouga speaker Lorraine Maree, ward 9 councillor Cynthia August, Independent Development Trust (IDT) deputy chair Prof Raymond Nkado and members of the municipality's mayoral committee.

Macpherson said the unfinished centre had become a source of shame, failing to honour the painful history endured by Sarah Baartman.

Baartman was born in the Hankey region, near the Gamtoos River.

Her life became a painful symbol of colonial exploitation,



LAYING THE FOUNDATIONS: Public works & infrastructure minister Dean Macpherson, left, officially hands over the Sarah Baartman Centre of Remembrance site to contractors on Saturday. The restarted project's new completion date is October 2027. Picture: SIMTEMBILE NGIDI

racism, sexism and denial of human dignity.

She died at age 26 in Paris on December 29 1815.

Baartman was exhibited as a freakshow attraction in 19th-century Europe under the name Hottentot Venus.

Her remains were repatriated to the Gamtoos Valley in 2002.

Macpherson said the project was far more than just another public works development.

It was a place that should embody memory, justice and

dignity while reflecting SA's obligation to tell the truth about its past as it built a better future.

"It was a great shame that the project had remained incomplete for more than a decade, particularly considering that it is a remembrance centre for Sarah Baartman."

"A hugely significant South African who suffered immense shame and indignity when she was taken from this country and shown as an amusement,

so the centre should have really been about restoring that dignity. In fact, it has prolonged that shame, and that is why, when I came into the office two years ago, one of the important things I wanted to do was to get failed projects like this back on track," Macpherson said.

Having made a promise in 2025 to the community of Hankey to get the project up and running, he said it would be different this time.

He announced that he had

already introduced the contractor to traditional leaders, the community and the municipality.

The project is now scheduled for completion by October 20 2027, with several specialised construction and heritage conservation works still to be undertaken.

The department said the project's delay was largely due to capacity constraints.

Macpherson acknowledged that contractors previously ap-

pointed by the department had failed to meet the required standard.

The department said it would be tightening oversight of the procurement process to deal with bidders whose contractor gradings appeared suspiciously inflated when tendering for government work.

"The project will cost R188m. That does not mean I am happy that such an amount has to be spent, because we have already spent a lot."

"Part of the brief is how we recover money from contractors that do not deliver."

"It should be a privilege to do business for the state and an honour to serve your country."

"Unfortunately, far too many people take it as an advantage. That is why I am pleased with the contractor that I saw."

"They went through a vigorous procurement process under the IDT."

The IDT is a dedicated social infrastructure implementation agency for the government.

Nkado said they aimed to

ensure the project was completed in record time.

Edmund Stuurman, Khoi chief and senior leader of the House of Klaas and Dawid Stuurman, said that when the project was delayed, there was a lot of frustration.

"Obviously, there were so many dreams of what the project was supposed to bring to the community — opportunities, economic benefits."

"When that had fallen flat, it left the community in a state where people were losing hope."

"It inspires hope that the memory of our past will not get lost."

"We want to thank Macpherson for providing a facility and infrastructure for the Khoi and San." — *The Herald*

