

Onwards and upwards

The Vanderbijlpark Chamber of Commerce was voted Best Chamber of Commerce in Gauteng from 2002 to 2006. Last year the chamber was voted the Best Chamber of Commerce in the country in addition to winning the President's Trophy.

These achievements are particularly notable since the area is one where service delivery has become a grave issue among all levels of the population. Clearly, the Vanderbijlpark Chamber of Commerce is doing something right.

"It has always been our motto and our strategy not to limit ourselves to criticism and not to point fingers," says former chairman, Henk Scheepers. "We roll up our sleeves and are determined to turn a negative situation into something positive that we can be proud of. We are renowned for our proactive approach in addressing problems."

The AHI Congress were hosted in the Vaal Triangle during 2004 for the first time since it was initiated in 1945 at Maccauvle. The build up towards this momentum led the top rollplayers to broadcast on the national television news headlines.

The chamber is run and managed purely by volunteers, with no full-time staff employed at all. Monthly meetings are

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exceptionally well attended and members are treated to truly high-quality presentations on a variety of topics which impact on their businesses, from government policies to the latest technology.

"We also have the advantage of a membership which covers an incredibly broad spectrum, from large companies to one-man-bands," says chairman, Johan Sittig.

"The Vaal Triangle has been nicknamed the Golden Triangle"

The chamber purposefully set out to turn around the negative perceptions which existed at the turn of the century, receiving a significant boost in 2005 when television channel, Kyknet, broadcast its first external transmission in the area. "That put our chamber and the Vaal Triangle firmly in the spotlight. It is now an annual programme which has been responsible for the Vaal Triangle being nicknamed the Golden Triangle," says Sittig. The programme highlights opportunities in the area and numerous local and international investors have responded positively.

In June 2006, Kyknet followed the programme with an in-depth look at the Vaal Meander Wine Route. This too has led to partnerships between the Midvaal and Parys region and the Vaal River Meander wine route has become a successfully only inland River Wine Route in the county. "Numerous cellars throughout the country have expressed keen interest in becoming involved," says Scheepers.

These initiatives are part of the chamber's drive to promote tourism, which is a big draw card in the region. "The river is one of our assets and we keep it in the foreground of our promotions." The chamber was instrumental in ensuring that the Homemakers Expo was staged in Vanderbijlpark for the first time in 2006.

"We also receive valuable publicity through the local media. Networking, organising presentations from foremost business and political figures, and visits to shows and organisations are important in putting us on the map," says Scheepers.

To ensure that all members are properly supported, more experienced members of the chamber offer themselves voluntarily as guardians to other members. "This is undoubtedly part of our success, since it creates enormous cohesion and support. There is a great deal of trust among members."

Among the innovative initiatives piloted by the chamber is the Community Diversion Project launched in 2005 in

conjunction with the Department of Justice. "Unemployment is one of our biggest challenges. To promote business, we need to stimulate the economy, which means creating a safe environment that is conducive to business. Crime must therefore be curbed. Instead of having minor charges for misdemeanours dropped, offenders are now required to perform community service for a day or more. From January to March 2008, almost 4 000 diversions were recorded. The project is now being rolled out to other cities."

The chamber's drive to stimulate entrepreneurial development is strong and on-going. It contributes financially to the University of the North West and the Vaal University of Technology to pilot various entrepreneurial projects.

The potential of developing the nearby airport is also one of the chamber's objectives. "We know that OR Tambo is overloaded and the airport in our area is ideally placed to reduce congestion by becoming a cargo hub," says Scheepers. "It is in close vicinity to Mittal, and to regional and national roads and highways."

Members of the chamber harbour no illusions about the difficulties that lie ahead, particularly in view of issues such as possible load shedding and the hurdles the local municipality faces in service delivery. Businesses should not take a back seat. In undertaking development they play a crucial role in providing roads, alternative energy sources and water and sanitation solutions.

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"While we are conscious of the challenges of 2008, we cannot afford to lose sight of the opportunities which 2009 and 2010 present," says Scheepers. "The government has announced huge capital investment projects, and we are confident that there will be an upsurge in the economy as a result."

"We are ensuring that our businesses will be well positioned to take advantage of the opportunities. We have always been in a unique environment which poses unique demands to business and we have always produced businessmen and women of the stature to overcome the challenges and provide benchmarks for the rest of the country." §

Information in this article is extracted from the draft Integrated Development Plan 2007/2008.