

Wishful thinking for Choo-Tjoe continues

GARDEN ROUTE NEWS - In Heritage and Tourism Month, hopes for reviving the Outeniqua Choo-Tjoe 67km train service between George and Knysna were expressed by the DA.

DA Western Cape Spokesperson Development, Tourism and Public Works MPL, Eugene von Brandis said he welcomed the investigation into finding optimal use of the railway line including options for using it as a tourist attraction, learner commute transport and even a carrier for refuse removal for Plettenberg Bay, Knysna and George.

He was referring to the business case proposal study launched by Western Cape Minister of Finance, Economic Development and Tourism Alan Winde, into the feasibility of reinstating South Africa's last remaining scheduled steam train service.

Winde told Knysna-Plett Herald's Fran Kirstin, "We are in discussions with the IDC (Industrial Development Corporation) and the National Department of Tourism to seek a multiple-party partnership agreement with Transnet and local government." He was speaking, following a presentation by the Department of Economic Development Tourism to the Standing Committee on Finance and Economic Development last week.

Bottom line

Earlier this year, Transnet CEO Brian Molefe poured cold water on hopes for a clear-cut solution, by saying quite unequivocally in a Business Day 30 April report that "Transnet does not have the R150-million required to put the Choo-Tjoe back on track, but we will listen to anyone who is prepared to put up the money." This follows a Transnet task team reportedly investigating various operational models, including forming partnerships during September 2011.

After a nine month wait, Minister Winde was informed that Transnet wants to see a business case study from the Western Cape Government, which will assist Transnet in making a decision on whether it can transfer the Outeniqua Choo-Tjoe rolling stock to a successful operator. Minister Winde said that the estimated cost implications of such a venture would need to be finalised.

Priority

At the beginning of the year, Winde expressed a sense of urgency about reinstating the service which has been out of commission, since the 2006 floods partly destroyed sections of the railway line. "The transfer of ownership of the train is a priority issue that needs to be addressed quickly if we are to preserve the train as a heritage icon. The longer it lies idle, the harder it will be to get it back on the tracks."

In a Business Day report, Mr Molefe stated categorically: "The Choo-Tjoe rail reserve belongs to Transnet. We have not considered alienating the railway land and we have no plans to do so yet. The only thing that could change is if someone brought R150-million to the table. Then we could talk." This did not deter Winde, who in June 2012, reported that talks were ongoing but that a suitable operator has not to date been identified.

Molefe also dashed the hopes of the Garden Route Cycleway Association, who want to construct a cycleway on the dormant railway line, with the proviso that Transnet would sign over the property and infrastructure.