



CHAIRMAN'S REPORT 2011 AGM

Twenty years ago, the last remaining active steam locomotives were playing out their final rites on the South African Railways. Contrary to what most would have thought, many of these precious items are still in existence today, and indeed 2011 still sees limited steam operations on the national network.

This in itself is a major achievement. Despite all the odds being stacked against heritage rail, primarily due to intransigence and indeed hostility from quarters in Transnet and government, as well as the general loss of skills and interest in steam as the old school dies out, there still exists an X-Factor amongst the steam clubs. It is this undying devotion to seeing their rolling stock out there, doing its thing on the big railway despite the walls of obstacles thrown in their way, in which true heroism can be found. Sometimes mere handfuls of individuals are keeping big operations going, by juggling the mix between paid and volunteer labour, by putting in the long hours at the desk and down at the depots, and by dealing with authorities who have not the slightest sympathy or understanding of the problems that are encountered in the industry; and this all in the name of keeping rail heritage alive in South Africa. As HRASA chairman, it is gratifying to see these operations continue into the second decade of the 21st century, and I am humbled by the devotion to duty that I see out there.

The appointed function of HRASA is to be the overseeing and negotiating arm of the heritage rail clubs in the country: bringing common concerns to Transnet, the RSR and other governing bodies, encouraging high standards of practice, and promoting the industry to government and in particular Tourism authorities. Whilst all these functions have not been completed according to what I would have liked to have seen, I take solace from the fact that we have operated under extremely trying circumstances.

The main problems experienced by HRASA are lack of support from members and the enthusiast public, and lack of recognition in positive engagement from authorities. It is easy to say that we should go out and make ourselves heard, and therefore be effective. When I first got involved in HRASA, I made TWO assumptions, both of which proved to be incorrect. I assumed that Transnet and Government would listen to our voice, and act constructively to assist the heritage rail industry. Secondly, I assumed that the network would remain amenable and usable to our needs, and to put it simply, that running trains wherever we wanted would not present a problem, within reason.

It is extremely disappointing to note that this has not been the case at all. Due to political factors in the main, heritage rail has been on a hiding to nothing. Routes are curtailed, service from TFR and PRASA is extremely poor – causing major delays and cancellations- and rules and regulations, paradoxically in such a poorly run network, threaten to snuff the life out of cash and personnel-strapped clubs. Even worse is that government, who are

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committed to grow the Tourism share of the budget, are doing nothing at all for our cause. Local government also show almost no interest in their local products, with the sole exception of Ingwe Municipality. And, most worrying of all is the general lack of communications by Transnet Foundation, the supposed custodians of the assets, and not working with or informing HRASA, their MoU partners.

I believe that these factors have led to the current chaotic situation surrounding our industry. Coupled with the lack of support and continuing infighting in our ranks, the future is unsure.

Clubs are finding survival increasingly difficult in the current economic climate, and I believe that under current conditions their operations are not sustainable in the long term: the field is too heavily weighted against them. This is where they look to HRASA for help. However, HRASA is actually the clubs. It is composed of a few people who are prepared to give up their time to make a difference. If only more involvement were evident, I believe our performance would have improved.

The years 2009/2010 saw a big effort on the part of the Board as a whole. We made ourselves known to all important players, and Board members regularly spent evenings and spare time at the computer and in meetings, trying as best we could. There were achievements, although not really acknowledged: we concluded access agreements, negotiated astronomical access fees, signed MoUs with TF and the RSR, and were instrumental in ensuring that 150 years of railways in SA was adequately celebrated.

2011 has admittedly seen a much quieter HRASA. Our membership and representation have dropped, the current Board are generally overworked in their day jobs, and there is sadly a sense of despondency in our ranks – mostly due to the ongoing paralysis with respect to the future of heritage assets and also continuing lack of political support. It is clear to me that without political support we cannot succeed, and will simply be brushed under the carpet. There are some signs that Tourism authorities are starting to listen to us, and I would suggest that the newly-elected board throw their weight behind this effort over the next year.

The loss of members, and lack of a co-ordinated approach, is of dire concern. I believe that authorities have been confused by the amount of correspondence from various sources within the heritage rail community. Because there have always been those who have had used the excuse of no faith in HRASA to push through personal agendas. They unfortunately elected to fight battles alone, despite HRASA having the mandate. This has given those we deal with a convenient reason not to co-operate.

It will take people of strong resolve and with time on their hands, to achieve a future for us. I would therefore appeal to all able-bodied members of our community, who are in the fortunate position of having spare time, and who will also make financial sacrifices – as has been done by the current Board up to now – to make your skills and services available to the HRASA Board, and take the fight forward. I firmly believe that we can achieve a future, but without some serious input and dedication from our members, as well as a unified approach, this will not happen.

I would at this point like to pay tribute to HRASA members who have unselfishly given of their time to serve the cause over the last year. Our Board members in particular deserve praise, and you will be able to follow their progress in their reports published. Thank you all, and may you continue to do your best.

Finally, I would like to announce that I will not be available for executive positions in HRASA next year, for personal reasons. The demands of my family and job have simply left too little time to deal effectively with such a responsible position. I have no regrets and look upon my time on the Board with pride, for I know in my heart that I gave of my best. I have made many friends and learnt a lot about life in this rollercoaster ride, but it is now time for someone else to have a go. My appreciation goes out to all of you members and associates who have stood by and assisted me on my journey. You will not be forgotten.

Chris Janisch

19 November 2011