

## Giving the Youth a Sporting Chance

*Tuesday 10 November 2009*

INTERNATIONALLY, sport has been heralded as the mechanism by which to facilitate children's holistic development and reduce gangsterism and anti-social behaviour, but translating the theory into practice requires focused government commitment.

Executive Mayor of the Sedibeng District Municipality, Mahole Simon Mofokeng says a Sharpeville community workshop last year proposed developing the region into "a centre of football excellence". National preparations ahead of hosting the 2010 FIFA World Cup Soccer have heightened the interest in the sport among a youth already driven by football.

"The tournament provides a strong focus for local government and other players to develop, improve and enhance Sedibeng including the opportunity to build a culture of sports development. Focusing the youth on sports, specifically soccer, affords them a healthy avenue for personal and social growth," Mofokeng says.

Established in 2000, Sedibeng evolved from the rich history of Evaton, Heidelberg, Sharpeville, Boipatong, Sebokeng, Vereeniging, Vanderbijlpark, Vaal Oewers, Vaal Marina and Suikerbosrand.

Mofokeng says the workshop highlighted the need for building and upgrading community sports facilities, prompting the municipality to invest in a multi-million-rand sports precinct as part of the broader Sharpeville upgrade initiative.

However, Mofokeng berated the lack of a premier football team in Sedibeng, indicating the situation was "a predicament for the sport-loving fans of the region". Consequently, the municipality is upgrading facilities and enhancing the development structures such that the youth can have access to the sport and hopefully enable Sedibeng to evolve into "the home of a successful premier football team".

"When so many football giants, both players and administrative, hail from the area, it is unthinkable that the region does not have a senior team in the Premier Soccer League (PSL) or Mvela League," he says.

Three inter-related Sharpeville precincts – heritage in the vicinity of the Sharpeville monument, sport and recreation around the George Thabe soccer stadium and recreation along the dam – are aimed at bringing to the key cultural and historic node an essence of harmony after a troubled past.

The George Thabe stadium honours the former soccer supremo best remembered for his leadership as chairman and founder-member of the National Professional Soccer League (NPSL). Thabe, who died in 2003, had also been president of the South African National Football Association and Football Council of South Africa.

A former chairman of the Vaal Professionals Football Club, he was an executive committee member and life president of the South African Football Association (SAFA), while outside of sport, had been a successful businessman serving on a host of blue-chip company boards.



The stadium has a rich history for sport and entertainment, but most significantly was the site where former president Nelson Mandela signed into law the South African Constitution in 1996.

“It is therefore a fitting tribute to Thabe that the stadium be renovated and upgraded into an integrated and sustainable community hub for the promotion of amateur sports and to ensure the facilities can be used for PSL and Mvela League games,” Mofokeng says.

He adds the sports node will respond to the sports development needs of local schools; provide specialist education programmes in sports administration and seek out sponsorship patronage from soccer leagues and sports codes.

The longer-term vision involves upgrading the sports facilities within Sedibeng, including the existing cricket ground and swimming pool, and developing additional sporting facilities such as soccer grounds, netball and volleyball grounds and tennis courts.

However, these initiatives fall outside the current project scope and Mofokeng says the government hopes the initial public sector commitment will attract private sector investment. Providing sports club facilities that house administration space and meeting rooms are also envisaged.

The UK-based Aaron Mokoena Foundation has expressed “keen interest” in establishing a regional sports academy. When the foundation opened its South African chapter earlier this year, the 28-year-old South African national football captain said he wanted to have an impact on the lives of the youth.

“I (can) be a role model and change lives and the younger ones need me. Seeing them smiling and feeling important, and knowing people care about them, is very rewarding,” he said.

Hailing Mokoena as “a true son of the soil”, Mofokeng believes the foundation will reignite the region’s once-proud soccer-playing history and advance the case for establishing a professional team in the Vaal area.

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