

HERITAGE ASSESSMENT OF THE PROPOSED SUBDIVISION OF ERF 2906 SWELLENDAM

Prepared in terms of section 38.2 of the National Heritage Resources Act No. 25 of
1999

For

Piet Groenewald (Town Planner)
on behalf of Rothman Development Trust

May 2006



Prepared by

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Archaeology Contracts Office of the University of Cape Town was appointed by Piet Groenewald (Town Planner) on behalf of Rothman Development Trust to conduct a heritage impact assessment (the identification and assessment of cultural resources) of erf 2906, Swellendam ("the property"). The proposed activity calls for the rezoning from Agricultural to Residential and Business and envisions 46 residential houses, 47 cluster homes, and 32 townhouses and 7 business units on currently vacant land.

The site lies in to the west of the town center of Swellendam, just off the main thoroughfare, Voortrekker Street and corner of Van der Walt Street (presently an overgrown track). The southern boundary of the property is the Cornlands River. There is no obvious land usage of the site, but the environs would suggest general grazing and light pedestrian traffic.

There are no structures of significance on the property, nor was any archaeological material observed. Identified heritage resources therefore relate to its context of 'place' in the Overberg region, specifically within the Swellendam landscape.

Provided that the proponent recognizes the sensitivity of the location of the study area on historic Voortrekker Street at the gateway to the town and that the proposal is sympathetic to this in terms of bulk, landscape, architectural design and "greening", the site is considered suitable for development.

The development proposal has been welcomed by the Swellendam Heritage Committee and supported by the Swellendam Municipality (letters of support included.)

2. DESCRIPTION OF THE AFFECTED ENVIRONMENT

The proposed development site lies in west Swellendam, on the south side of Voortrekker Road. The property in question is 5.7820 ha in extent. It is a low-lying area with a moderately steep gradient sloping down from the level of Voortrekker Road, which levels off to support densely vegetated lands (grass and bush) and a wooded riparian corridor at the 1: 50 year flood line. The steep and vegetated banks of the Cornlands River define the property's southern boundary.

The site is bounded by a diverse range and styles of residences - from the upmarket Rothman's guesthouse (est. 1843) to the west, leafy colonial style properties along Voortrekker Road, middle-low income housing to the east, and lower-income dwellings immediately across the river.

The property is currently vacant and unused. The adjacent vacant land to the north east is owned by the municipality who envisages it for use as a fairly dense medium and low cost housing estate (EIA not yet completed). Plates 1 and 2 illustrate the general setting of the property. Plate 3 shows the middle-lower class housing on the eastern neighbouring property. Plate 4 is from a vantage point from Voortrekker Road across the property in question.

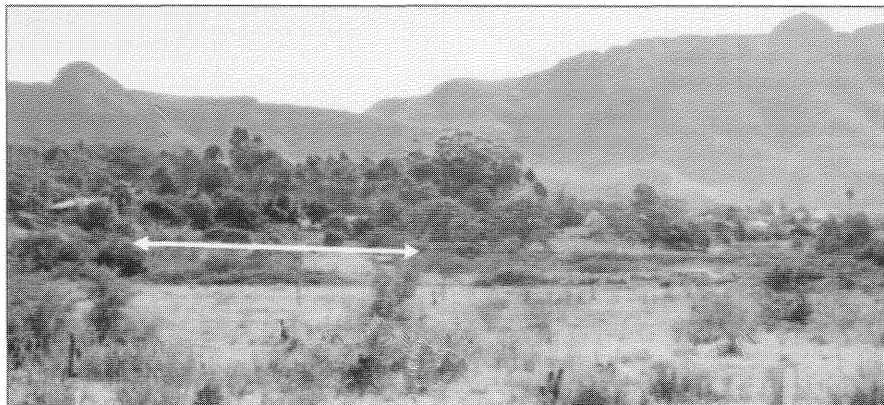


Plate 1 General setting of property, facing north/northwest. Level of Voortrekker Road is indicated by the white arrow.



Plate 2. Property to the east of study area. Detailed view of middle-low income housing node.

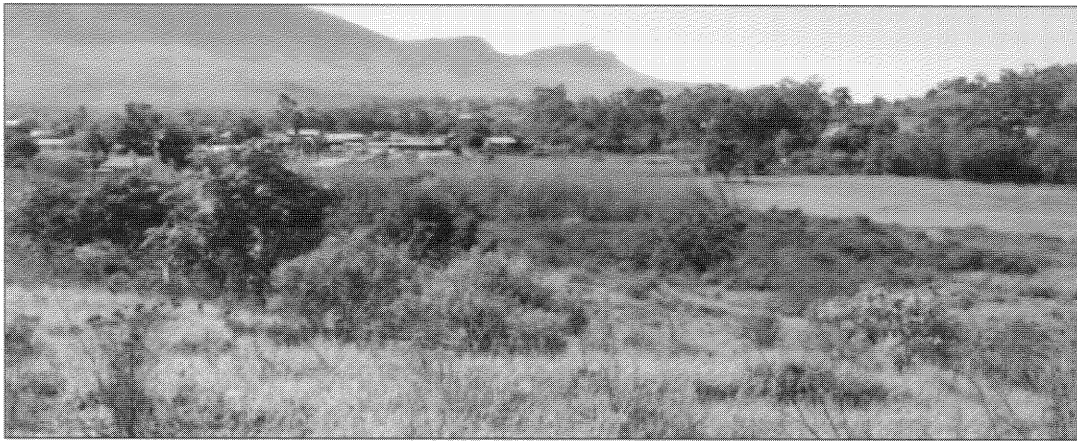


Plate 3. View across property in question from edge of Voortrekker Rd, facing southwest. Note middle-income housing node on the far property (detail below). A housing development is planned for the adjacent land in the middle distance.

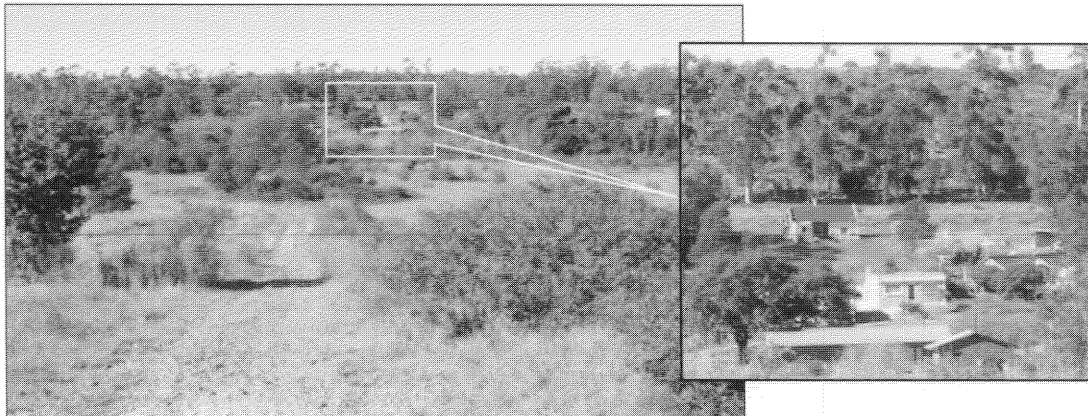


Plate 4. The study area from Voortrekker Rd. The Cornlands River lies in the middle distant vegetation while the insert shows the housing on the other side of the river. The N2 lies behind *bluegum* trees on the ridgeline.

3. THE PROPOSAL

The proponent would like to develop the site for housing purposes with the possibility of business frontage along Voortrekker Road. The concept involves 46 residential homes (13 per hectare), 47 cluster houses (30 per hectare) and 32 town houses (50 per hectare). Provision has been made for 8 business units along the Voortrekker Road frontage. The concept involves freestanding homes in the center of the erf (3 blocks linked by a street system) with group and cluster housing on the north and south sides of the erf. All structures will be limited to a height restriction of two storeys. The riverine area below the 1:50 year flood line will be "private open space".

The Swellendam Heritage Association has met with the proponents and their consultants and is satisfied that the consultation process that has been followed has resulted in a proposal that is in keeping with historical Swellendam ambience, without trying to "mimic" an artificial historical style.

4. LEGISLATIVE CONTEXT

Section 38 of the National Heritage Resources Act of 1999 makes the identification of those "heritage resources" which are considered part of the "national estate" mandatory for developments that fulfill certain criteria as prescribed by the Act. Since the property in question is greater than 5000 sq m and will involve rezoning, and changes to the landscape a heritage impact assessment is necessary. Discussions of some of the definitions contained in the act are relevant. While the old National Monuments Act of 1969 was focused on the protection of certain kinds of archaeological and palaeontological objects and certain buildings, the new act that became effective within the Western Cape in 2003 is far broader in the definition of what constitutes the "national estate" – this is the nation's identity as characterised by its cultural assets which are very broadly defined. This includes not only buildings or objects but also places and regions. Furthermore the law acknowledges that natural landscapes also form part of the National Estate. This means that Heritage Impact Assessments must acknowledge not only buildings and objects but also their cultural and natural context.

4.1 Relevant definitions

As contained in the National Heritage Resources Act are as follows:¹

4.1.1 Heritage resource

Is defined in the act as meaning "any *place* or *object* of cultural significance"

4.1.2 Place

A *place* as defined in the act includes--

- a) a *site, area* or *region*;
- b) a *building* or other structure which may include equipment, furniture, fittings and articles associated with or connected with such building or other structure;
- c) a *group of buildings* or other structures which may include equipment, furniture, fittings and articles associated with or connected with such group of buildings or other structures;

¹ National Heritage Resources Act 1999 section 2.

- d) an *open space*, including a *public square*, *street* or *park*; and
- e) in relation to the management of a place, includes the *immediate surroundings* of a *place*;

4.1.3 Cultural significance

In terms of the act this means “aesthetic, architectural, historical, scientific, social, spiritual, linguistic or technological value or significance”;

4.1.4 National Estate

The definition of the “national estate” is extensive; however the following excerpt is relevant in terms of heritage impact assessment. “*For the purposes of this Act, those heritage resources of South Africa which are of cultural significance or other special value for the present community and for future generations must be considered part of the national estate and fall within the sphere of operations of heritage resources authorities*”.

The NHRA is normally applied by Heritage Western Cape (HWC), however in terms of section 38.10 of the Act, if the study is done *as part of an EIA*, once HWC has had opportunity to comment on the proposal, and provided that such comments are complied with, implementation of the general protections of the Act reverts to The Department of Environment Affairs and Planning, or where appropriate, Department of Mineral and Energy Affairs.

5. ASSESSMENT METHODS

This is a Stage 1 assessment which has involved a site visit, discussion with the proponent and other consultants. Background research was undertaken both at the Cape Archives and Drosdy Museum in Swellendam. The site was physically inspected by Tim Hart, Liesbet Schietecatte and Erin Finnegan, while the proponents themselves consulted with local interest groups.

5.1 Restrictions

There was dense grass coverage over most of the site, hindering visibility. The steep and densely vegetated riverbanks were not searched. Examples of ground cover are indicated below (Plates 5-7)



Plate 5



Plate 6

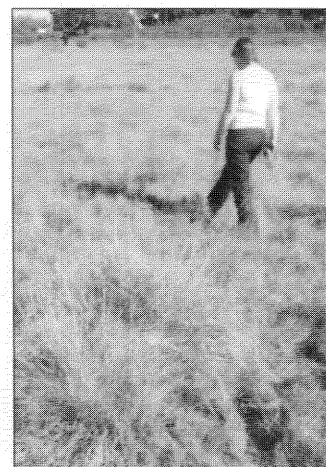


Plate 7

6. HERITAGE LANDSCAPE CONTEXT

Within the first decades of the establishment of the Cape settlement, bartering trips into the interior whetted the settlers' appetite for land and stock. Free burghers were setting sights on land in the Hessequa 'territory' (from Stormsriver to Riversdale) and turned an envious eye towards the Gouritz river where Gouriqua kept "the finest cattle yet seen at the Cape."² By the 1740s the first wave of Overberg stock farmers crossed the daunting Hottentots-Holland Mountains and pushed through to Mossel Bay and beyond. The journey was arduous and the mountain passes, 'murderous'. Once established in the hinterland, farmers who traveled back to Cape Town from outpost farms to attend to official or business matters, could expect a journey of up to two months round-trip.

The Stellenbosch landdrost felt that they had lost control of all burghers to the east, and the threat that they were 'going native' compromised the Company's profit margins, as there was an increased delinquency on loan repayments by these eastern farmers. The Drosdy at Swellendam was established in 1746 as a 'halfway' point for official and judicial issues. This outpost in the Cornlands Valley quickly flourished with commercial ventures of tradesmen and shopkeepers. In his book, *Overberg Outspan*, Edmund Burrows states:

"To the Old Cape travelers this place represented what Table Bay was to the eastern sea-route: here they halted for their final respite, to replenish their supplies from the orchards and cornfields of the Drosdy; to enlist the services of a local wainwright or blacksmith, and to enjoy their last nights rest in civilized surroundings, before plunging into the untamed frontier country in the east."³

Swellendam is historically significant for being the second established judicial and legal center (of European judicial system influence) in southern Africa. It is also rather infamous for its five-month stint as a Republic - the center of a rebel government in 1795.

Although the Great Fire of 1865 effectively wiped out most of the buildings dating from the first 100 years of the town's existence, many important dwellings and estates remain. Their architectural features are important stages in the evolution of the vernacular Cape Dutch style. Thus the town is not only a significant local tourism generator, but is of also historical and academic importance because of its preserved landscape qualities and unique buildings and streetscapes.

³ Burrows, Edmund, 1952: *Overberg Outspan: A Chronicle of People and Places in the South Western District of the Cape*, Maskew Millen Ltd, Cape Town, p. 20

7. FINDINGS

7.1 Historical Context

No buildings, structures or archaeological material were found on the property, therefore there are no obvious evidence of human energy or skill as significant inputs upon the landscape (apart from possible cultivation). Archival study has yielded scant information on the associations between this piece of land and any important historical events or farms. The map of 1790 Swellendam (Plate 8) illustrates various farms north of the Cornlands River and along the Old Cape 'Waagen Pad', (the current 'Voortrekker Street'). The property in question is located further west of these illustrated homesteads and it is likely that the land was common grazing ground into the 19th century. The land may have been cultivated under subsequent owners in the 19th or 20th centuries.

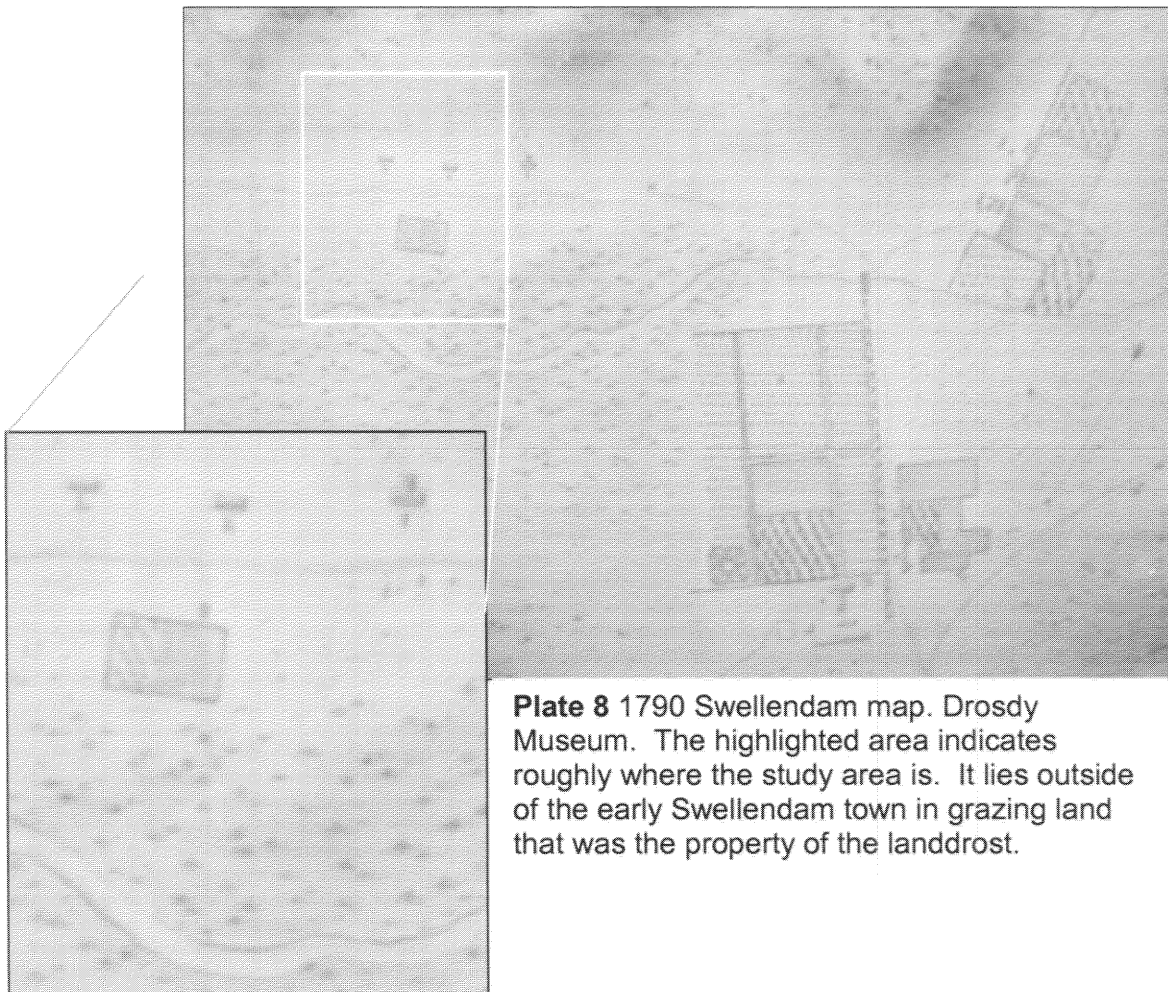


Plate 8 1790 Swellendam map. Drosdy Museum. The highlighted area indicates roughly where the study area is. It lies outside of the early Swellendam town in grazing land that was the property of the landdrost.

8. Assessment of heritage qualities and impacts

No structures or archaeological material were identified on the property, nor any documentary or oral evidence of its historical significance located. The property's heritage significance will be considered in terms of its scenic qualities, and overall aesthetic importance in the context of the Overberg Region and Swellendam town.

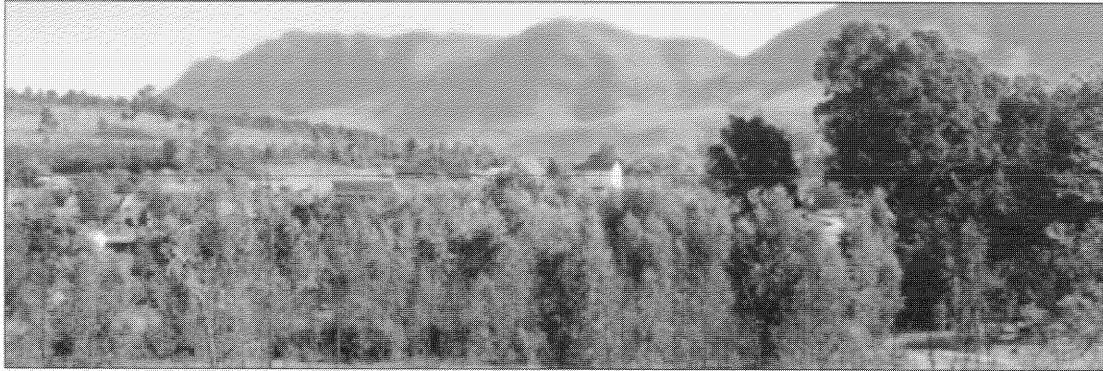


Plate 9. Vista from the N2. Study area is mostly behind the tree line.



Plate 10. Vista from the south of Cornlands River. Study area lies behind treeline

The property retains a sense of the historical Swellendam, in that the Cornlands Valley was used for gardens and grazing ground. Fortunately, the low-lying nature of the property is such that the residential units will be 'embedded' into its agricultural milieu and will be unobtrusive from most vistas in the environs of Swellendam town. Additionally, the development will effectively be screened from the N2 and the southern bank of the Cornlands River by the riparian corridor. This green visual screen is considered an important feature as it will reduce potential negative impacts upon visual corridors and upon the 'semi-rural' context of the urban edge.

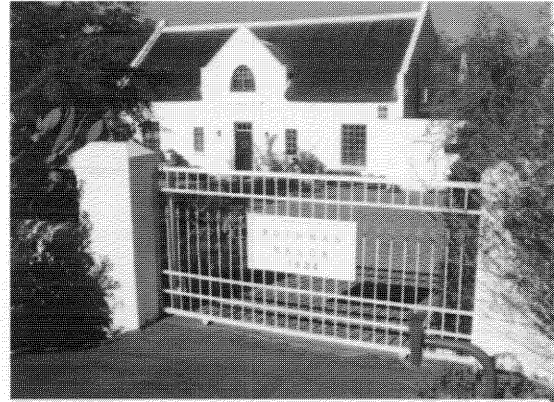
Visual
Analysis

8.1 Voortrekker Streetscape

The impact of the development upon the Voortrekker Road streetscape is considered to be the most critical. Voortrekker Road is an Old Cape Historical Road ('Waagen Pad') through Swellendam, and there is a distinctive charm imbued by historical buildings and

the green-lined approach into town along this thoroughfare, set against the impressive backdrop of the Langeberg Mountains. Edmund Burrows has described Swellendam as

“a one-street town. Since time immemorial, its street has run up the Cornlands Valley to the *braak* before the Dutch Reformed Church and then taken a right-angled turn to ford the river, on its way to Groot Vaders bosch and the Outeniqua law...”⁴



Plates 11 and 12. The Rothman Manor guesthouse (1843), on neighbouring erf.



Plates 13 and 14, Views west and east along Voortrekker Street from Erf 2906. The study area lies below the embankment on which the street is laid.

The greatest area of concern would lie in the appropriateness of the street frontage architecture and whether the aesthetic elements would make a positive contribution to the overall tone of the historical street. Appropriate architectural design has the potential to guide future development towards reflecting the town's historic legacy, as well as retaining the distinctive ambiance and character of Swellendam. The proponent has gone to a great deal of effort to draw up architectural guidelines for the business units which is deemed to be in keeping with the character of the “place”. The residential units may be somewhat ‘hidden’ behind the street frontage due to the gradient between street and property, but even so, the importance of visual cohesion of the streetscape and cluster homes, townhouses and single-residential homes is important.

7/11/2011

⁴ Burrows, p. 67

8.2 Roofscapes

An impact commonly caused by developments which involve dense clusters of houses is the visual impact of a mass of uniform and similarly textured and coloured roofs which can alter the character of a small town especially if it is situated in a valley or surrounded by hills or other elevated landscape, which is particularly the case in Swellendam. The effect of a mass of roofs is to interrupt the rhythm of the town within its landscape context creating hard edges and excessive visual contrast. The effect can be mitigated by introducing a little variety in roof form, texture, colour and allowing sight of green spaces – bushes and trees which go a long way to soften the effect. While this particular development site is situated within various already existing screens of vegetation, we ask the developer to consider this factor in the final design as existing vegetation screens are not necessarily permanent.

8.3 Edge hardening

A further suggestion to the proponent concerns the proposed layout of the development, which as it is now, could result in hard urban edges. The clustering of group housing and town housing on the periphery of the proposed development area will result in visual contrast within a townscape that is characterised by well-patinated soft edges. An option would be to integrate group and cluster housing into the development area in such a way as to break the edges and create areas for greening, however the proponent has argued that town houses along Van der Walt Street will create a necessary buffer between the proposed development and the lower income development planned for the adjacent property.

9. CONCLUSIONS

Erf 2906 being previously agricultural land with no intrinsic historical significance, is not considered to be of high heritage significance. Its value lies in its context in one of the provinces oldest and best preserved historical towns. The site is sensitive in terms of:

Its position at the entrance to the town along Voortrekker Street.

Its low-lying valley context among green areas and gardens along Voortrekker Street.

Being situated within the urban edge in an area earmarked for urban expansion, and well outside the core Swellendam historic precinct, we believe that the site is developable provided that the proposal is sensitive to the context of the "place", contributes to the sense of history upon entering the town, and does not force undue visual contrast.

10. RECOMMENDATIONS

Given the nature of the surrounding residential areas, the quality of the local cultural landscape, the proposed development may be seen as suitable.

It is recommended that the development be allowed to proceed with the following mitigatory conditions:

- The retention of all significant trees on the property, particularly along the Cornlands River (excluding aggressively invasive alien species).
- The gentle slope of the property allows for business units to be set back from the Voortrekker streetscape to mitigate potential negative impact on vistas. The steep gradient on the edge of Voortrekker Street could be used as a device to lessen the apparent height of the business units.
- The planting of trees and shrubbery, creation of small front gardens in front of the business units, the use of stoeps, canopies and varying roof styles, textures and heights will assist in merging the new development into the streetscape.
- Interruption of the edges of the proposed development so as to reduce visual contrast and create opportunities for greening.
- Heritage Western Cape may require that architectural plans for buildings be submitted to them for approval in terms of design, massing and scale.

11. INVESTIGATION TEAM

Fieldwork: T. Hart
E. Finnegan
L Schietecatte

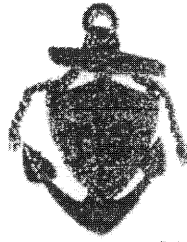
Report: E. Finnegan
T. Hart

*Rem to BELCOM.
No objection - Architect.*

SWELLENDAM

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2006-08-28

Mr Herman Van As
Rothman Trust
STILBAAI

PROPOSED DEVELOPMENT : VOORTREK STREET, SWELLENDAM

Your enquiry regarding the above refers.

It is hereby confirmed that the Municipality of Swellendam supports the opinion of the Swellendam Heritage Association as stated in their letter dated 12 August 2006.

Yours faithfully

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'K.R. Gordon', written over a horizontal line.

K.R. GORDON
ACTING MUNICIPAL MANAGER

Swellendam Heritage Association

PO Box 349
SWELLENDAM
6740
12 August 2006

Mr Herman van As
Rothman Trust.
Still Bay.

Dear Mr van As

PROPOSED DEVELOPMENT : VOORTREK STREET, SWELLENDAM

We should like to thank both you and Mr Willie van Rensburg for attending the committee meeting of the Swellendam Heritage Association on 8th August, as well as an earlier meeting with the representatives of this body on 2nd March 2006. As a result of discussions at these meetings we have been able to assess the probable impact on the town of your proposed development, and we are happy to report that we find your proposals entirely acceptable. You have clearly demonstrated your willingness to consult with the representatives of local opinion, and have shown that you are aware of the aesthetic and historical considerations that apply in a town such as this.

Your photographic exploration, together with the present writer, of suitable examples of both new and historical Swellendam architecture has obviously paid off, and we feel that the resulting development will, as far as possible, be in keeping with the existing atmosphere of the town, without trying to create an artificial 'historical' style. Of this we entirely approve. The only reservations that were expressed concerned assurances that the end-product would be what we had seen and endorsed. You have, however, given us the assurance that this will be so.

We must however emphasize the fact that the role of the Swellendam Heritage Association is merely that of an unofficial 'watchdog'. We have no official standing, but feel that, as we represent a large number of conservation-conscious townspeople, and are officially represented on the Aesthetics Committee of the Greater Swellendam Municipality and on the Committee of Heritage SA, our voice does carry some weight.

Further, we would like to express the sincere hope that future developments adjacent to yours in the 'Onderdorp' will be influenced by your example and will be of a comparable standard.

Yours sincerely



CHRIS PEROLD: Vice Chairman