



## **MEDIA RELEASE**

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### **MEDIA RELEASE FROM KNYSNA MAYOR ELEANORE BOUW-SPIES**

#### **Knysna will rise again, stronger than before**

The Knysna Municipality has been declared a fire disaster following the devastating fires that started on 7 June.

The majority of the Knysna Disaster Relief Fund will be focused on providing humanitarian assistance to residents of the Knysna fire and towards reconstruction efforts that will benefit all the communities of Greater Knysna.

This was resolved during today's special meeting of the Knysna Council.

Mayor of Knysna, Eleanore Bouw-Spies said: "Thousands of residents have been affected by these devastating fires that ravaged our town. Greater Knysna has received an unprecedented outpouring of support from residents across South Africa and abroad, and have begun to rebuild our town. Donations received will be used toward this.

"Today we put structures in place to ensure the Knysna disaster fund is managed against clear objectives, with transparency and strict accountability."

The remaining set objectives include: trauma counselling, clean-up initiatives, alleviating environmental concerns and rehabilitating vegetation, business- and economic development support.

#### **Humanitarian Assistance**

Hundreds of people have been displaced due to the loss of their homes and possessions. Donations of blankets, food, toiletries and clothing have met much of the initial requirements. However, rehousing takes time and there will be a need to provide medical care, shelter, mattresses, household utensils, water and numerous other items for some period of time to enable people to get back on their feet. There will also be a need to assess the damage to farming, livestock, wildlife and household pets.

## **Infrastructure**

Knysna is a town with a growing residential population and a thriving tourism sector. The fire seriously damaged infrastructure affecting the provision of electricity, water and sewage. It also showed how dangerous the existing road system is with the exits from Knysna in all directions closed due to the ferocious fires. The replacement and upgrading of existing infrastructure will receive priority attention, enabling reliable power, water provision, storage and usage, better waste management, modern communication highways and improved road, rail and water transport.

## **Trauma Counselling and Support**

The scale of the devastation, and its impact on people, many of whom are young children or elderly, has affected the whole town. Expert counselling will be required, in varying degrees, for those directly affected by tragic loss as well as those who witnessed the ravages of the fire. The ability for Knysna to rebuild the town as a tourist destination with a thriving community will depend on how well those living in the town overcome their shared experience and trauma.

## **Environmental management**

Among the reasons that the fire was so devastating was because of the drought, shortage of water, and proliferation of alien vegetation particularly wattle and eucalyptus. Fires generally result in an increased growth spurt of these invasive species, laying the seeds for an even more devastating fire in the future.

Programmes must be put in place to continuously remove and limit the new growth of alien vegetation. At the same time, the hillsides and dunes that have been laid bare by the fires need to be rehabilitated as a matter of urgency. Should there be heavy rainfall, mud slides may be a reality. Consequent silting can damage the Knysna River Estuary and the lagoon with long term effects on the water and eco-system.

## **Business Support**

Many unique small and medium sized businesses have been devastated by the fires, particularly timber mills and furniture factories that have made their name using indigenous woods. The fund will be utilised to provide support of varying kinds to assist small businesses to restart, or new ventures to come into being. This will provide the means for Knysna to regenerate its unique business opportunities and the tourism sector.

## **Reconstruction**

All of the above outlines what should form part of the reconstruction of Knysna in the interests of all its communities. It should enable the Knysna Municipality to develop a comprehensive reconstruction and development plan that will enable growth and prosperity in the years ahead.

## **Employment**

The Fund, in giving effect to the framework of support outlined above, needs to focus on local employment and the use, as far as possible, of local skills such as builders, plumbers, electricians, suppliers, professional skills and expertise. We will seize the opportunity to upgrade local skills and to grow industrial and artisan expertise in our town.

The Knysna Disaster Relief Fund has been set up as a separate bank account, in line with the Municipal Finance Management Act. Strict processes have been put in place in respect of expenditure against the fund. A working committee which includes external players from a major bank and accounting firm, is in the process of being established to oversee the fund. The Working Group will submit regular reports to Council in respect of the fund. These details will also be made publically available, and independently audited.

Two further announcements were made today. As Knysna residents have suffered through a devastating event, with many in shock, we have set up a trauma counselling centre at the Knysna library, where residents can receive emotional support.

We have also brought an asbestos specialist on board who will work in conjunction with Eden District Health Services to advise on the proper disposal of asbestos sheeting.

Mayor Bouw-Spies concluded: "Knysna has suffered many jobs losses as a result of these fires. Around 2 500 jobs have been affected and in Knysna's rebuild effort, we want local residents to benefit from the jobs created.

"In the short term, we need clean up jobs, and in the long term, we need the full range of artisans including plumbers, electricians, builders and bricklayers. We are working across all spheres of government on a plan to upskill our people to take up new opportunities.

"Knysna will rise, and we will rise stronger than ever before."

## **ENDS**

### EDITOR'S NOTE

#### Weather Forecast

Strong winds are currently blowing and predicted for Saturday, 15 June. The Fire Chief says that the fire remains under control and assures that teams remain on the ground and a spotter plane in the air to monitor the situation.

Four helicopters remain on standby in Knysna to deal with possible flare-ups. Residents are requested to, where possible, to secure items that may cause damage, such as roof sheets.

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**Knysna Municipality Communications Department**  
P O Box 21, Knysna. 6570. Western Cape. South Africa  
Tel +27 (0)44 302 6300 (switchboard) or 302 6471 (direct)  
Fax +27 (0)86 215 4818 e-mail [communications@knysna.gov.za](mailto:communications@knysna.gov.za)