

Choo-Tjoe: A whole lot of steam

KNYSNA NEWS - Social media was buzzing with excitement, but the excitement was short-lived as it became known that posts regarding the imminent return of the iconic Choo-Tjoe steam train were not entirely accurate.

One of the optimistic posts read: "Local and national government have decided to repair the railroad between George and Knysna. The main focus will be freight, but the old Knysna Choo-Tjoe will be the cherry on the cake! The work will start early in 2015 - Donald Grant (minister of Transport Western Cape)."

Siphesihle Dube, spokesperson for Western Cape minister of Transport and Public Works, Donald Grant, explained that the confusion may have arisen during a presentation by Grant and Western Cape minister of Finance, Dr Ivan Meyer, at the Eden District Municipal Forum in George on Friday, November 21.

During this presentation the provincial government's plans to explore the possible regeneration of rail in the area, in coordination with Transnet, were discussed. "Minister Grant had emphasised the Western Cape's strategic objective of moving freight off the road, and back onto rail." Dube added, "There are no timelines, except for a joint undertaking to conduct a study into the economic viability of such a project for the area. There is no project as of yet, and no budget allocated to that work."

It was further understood that the ministers would meet with Transnet on Monday, November 24 to discuss the way forward.

TFR

However, Mike Asefovitz, senior manager of communication and media for Transnet Freight Rail (TFR), said that he was unaware of any scheduled meeting. He added, "TFR regularly receives enquiries and passionate pleas from interested parties regarding the reinstatement and tourism application of the George-Knysna line, which requires a substantial amount of money to repair, and the company is and remains amenable to initiatives to attract freight traffic back to rail."

In August, TFR's CEO Syabonga Gama stated that Transnet would invest R312-billion over the next seven years and that the company hoped to attract R100-billion from private investors to establish more effective and cost-effective supply chains in rail transport. This seven-year market demand strategy requires TFR to shift road freight to rail-friendly freight traffic. Gama also said that TFR planned to replace some of its ageing stock with 1 400 new locomotives within the next four year.

According to Gama TFR had identified 20 branch lines, including the George to Knysna line, which could possibly be developed for tourism.

Outeniqua Choo-Tjoe

Ever since the railway line between George and Knysna was severely damaged during the 2006 flash floods, Knysna's own minister, Alan Winde (minister of Economic Growth and Tourism) has been trying to get the Outeniqua Choo-Tjoe back on track.

As the line is only a branch line, it does not fall within the greater Transnet strategy. Furthermore it did not generate a profit for Transnet before it was damaged. Therefore the repair was allegedly not a priority with Transnet.

2010

During 2010, Transnet reported that the company and Winde had been in discussions regarding the George-Knysna line. The discussions hoped to ensure that tourism and other opportunities presented by the line were unlocked through the facilitation of the provincial government.

2011

A Transnet task team reportedly investigated various operational models, including forming partnerships.

2012

Early in 2012, Transnet CEO Brian Molefe was reported to say that Transnet did not have the R150-million required to put the Choo-Tjoe back on track. Later that year, Winde was informed that Transnet wanted to see a business case study from the Western Cape Government - A study which would assist Transnet in making a decision on whether it could transfer the Outeniqua Choo-Tjoe rolling stock to a successful operator.

Also in 2012, Molefe dashed the hopes of the Garden Route Cycleway Association who wanted to construct a cycleway on the unused railway line.

2013

In December 2013, Winde's department finalised a Memorandum of Understanding with the Industrial Development Corporation (IDC), for co-operation on all tourism development in the Western Cape, including the development of tourism infrastructure, tourism routes and niche markets.

2014

Minister Winde said during an Eden District Municipality Business Breakfast that he was cautiously optimistic about the future of the Choo-Tjoe.

ARTICLE: FRAN KIRSTEN

'We bring you the latest Knysna, Garden Route news'