

ADDRESS BY THE MEC FOR ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT, ENVIRONMENT AND TOURISM, MR M.N MOKOENA, MPL, DURING THE ANNUAL ROADSHOW OF THE GRADING COUNCIL OF SOUTH AFRICA AT THE PROTEA WINKLER HOTEL IN WHITE RIVER, MBOMBELA LOCAL MUNICIPALITY.

Monday, 19 March 2012

Programme Director;

Acting CEO of the Mpumalanga Tourism and Parks Agency, Dr Nthabiseng Motete;

CEOs of various hotels within our province present;

Chief Quality Assurance Officer of the Tourism Grading Council of South Africa (TGCSA), Ms Thembi Kunene;

Representatives from public entities present;

Officials from the TGCSA;

Members of the Media;

Distinguished guests;

Ladies and gentlemen;

Good Morning!

I'm humbled and honoured to have been afforded an opportunity to address this, the Annual Road-show of the Grading Tourism Council of South Africa, with Stakeholders in our beautiful, scenic and breathtaking province of Mpumalanga. It is a tourism destination which once you could experience, you will never want to leave it. I guarantee you that you will always come back for more. Our people are warm, loving and welcoming – one of the main reasons why we always receive guests. We continue to be the third most visited destination in South Africa visited by international tourists, after Gauteng and Cape Town.

I strongly believe that we would be on the number one spot had it not that Gauteng, in particular Ekurhuleni through the O.R Tambo International Airport, was not the gateway or entry point into South Africa for international tourists. Furthermore, if we had an ocean, beaches and the historic *Robben Island*, given that we already boast picturesque mountainous areas, I don't doubt that we would be at the top of the rest.

Ladies and gentlemen;

It is said in the Bible in *Genesis* that God worked for six (6) days to create the heaven, the earth and all living plants and creatures, and on the seventh day, he rested. Considering that light is the sign of life and that the sun rise in our province, it is evident that God started his creation right here – in Mpumalanga. Furthermore, given the breathtaking scenery of the highland meander to the panorama route up to *God's Window*, I'm quite certain that when the Almighty God rested on the seventh day, he rested in this province.

Mpumalanga is the land of pioneers – the land of 'firsts,' and the evidence is all there for everyone to witness. We boast the oldest rock formations in the world dating back to 3.5 billion years in the form of the Makhonjwa mountains down in Barberton – the list is endless. These formations are now on the list to be considered as a World Heritage Site by *UNESCO*.

Ladies and gentlemen;

Key to attracting more visitors and keeping our province permanently engraved in their minds, are excellent customer care and quality and comfortable tourism attractions and establishments. A good experience will increase arrival numbers, both domestic and international. We still have a challenge to lure more South Africans to visit our province, given that we are still the sixth most visited province in relation to the domestic market.

The tourism and hospitality sector contributes significantly to the economy of our province, hence this sector will be one of the focus areas in implementing the *Mpumalanga Economic Growth and Development Path – the MEGDP*. We strongly believe that the said sector can contribute meaningfully towards job creation, hence it should be nurtured at all costs.

Working together, we can do more to increase Mpumalanga's domestic market share thereby creating more jobs, decrease unemployment, fight poverty and inequality.

I therefore appreciate your commitment of continuously engaging stakeholders to ensure that all parties continue to understand the significance of upholding the standards as per the grading they received from your institution. Like I indicated earlier, these standards should always be coupled with excellent customer service, if we are to keep our establishments full at all times.

When this happens, we will continue to contribute towards making brand South Africa competitive and really fly high South Africa's brand in relation to the tourism and the hospitality industry to the international market.

We have an intention as a province, to facilitate the establishment of an International Convention Centre, and to lure international people to use this proposed facility by bringing conferences to our province. When this happens, jobs will be created and our economy will be boosted – the results being lesser unemployment and lesser poverty.

Ladies and Gentlemen;

As government, our role is to ensure that we create, through policy and regulation, an enabling environment where business can operate both in terms of the rules of that particular industry but most importantly, safeguard through certain guidelines, those South Africans who choose to invest in our economy by establishing businesses relevant to that industry.

In terms of the tourism industry, we have over the past few years seen a number of South Africans and those from outside our borders, seeing the value of investing in our tourism sector through the launching of accommodation and conference establishments.

While the enabling environment exists for this to happen, it is equally important that these businesses, established or emerging, align themselves to the regulations that have been put in place by institutions such as the *Tourism Grading Council of South Africa – the TGCSA*. We appreciate *TGCSA*'s efforts of ensuring a seamless process of managing quality assurance for tourism products. As we have seen through their experience, this has allowed them to deliver on their promise of a quality experience to tourists visiting our country. This exercise was not only aimed at ensuring that the industry buys into particular quality standards, and is professional, but central to this, is the drive to get all establishments behind *Brand South Africa*.

The responsibility of ensuring that the tourism industry is sustainable does not rest solely with government. It is critical that owners of accommodation and conference establishments take advantage of the environment we have created as government, and have their businesses graded by *the TGCSA*.

It is imperative that as owners of accommodation and conference establishments must begin to understand the importance of having your establishments graded, in order to not only be in line with *Brand South Africa*, but to also play a role in contributing to our country's global competitiveness through the quality and professionalism of your establishment.

While the question of having your establishments graded might seem clear cut, the reality is that in Mpumalanga alone, **out of a total of 1310 establishments, only 324 are graded**. On a national level, out of a total of 23,467 establishments, just on 6,000 are graded. This raises the question of whether business owners are not aware of the need to have their establishments graded, or if they don't necessarily see the benefits of doing this. They seem to be unaware of how this affects *Brand South Africa* and *Brand Mpumalanga*.

Ladies and gentlemen;

The National Minister of Tourism Martinus van Schalkwyk has spoken on a number of platforms about the need to further promote the culture of domestic tourism where more South Africans are tourists in their own country. Through the National Tourism Sector Strategy, the Minister has set targets with the aim to increase domestic trips from the 30,9 million in 2009 to 54 million by the year 2020. These targets also include the targets of achieving the overall sector goal of 225,000 jobs by 2020.

The reality is that with an increase in the number of South Africans travelling in their own country, there will equally be an increase in the need for accommodation. As government, through entities such as the *South African Tourism* and the *Mpumalanga Tourism and Parks Agency*, part of promoting domestic tourism will include highlighting the need for South Africans to stay in only graded establishments where we will be in a position to guarantee quality service excellence.

This also includes the promotion of graded conference establishments when we talk of business tourism in relation to the meetings industry. As an indication of how seriously we take the matter of graded establishments, **all government departments are mandated by law to only procure accommodation and conferencing facilities from graded establishments only.** This then says that if you want business from government, be it at local, provincial and national level, you can only be considered if your establishment is graded by *the TGCSA*.

The reality is that quality graded establishments provide visitors to the province with a value for money in that they know what to expect from either a 1, 2,3,4 or 5 star establishment. Experience has taught us that non-graded establishments are a risk to the province, and the country at large, given that a visitor to that establishment has no recourse should the quality of their experience not be a positive one.

Through the adherence to the requirements set by *the TGCSA* in grading establishments, we are able to assist businesses in reaching a certain level of quality, but most importantly, we are able to assist maintain that level in order to compete with other provinces and countries in terms of the service excellence.

As the Provincial government, we support the star grading system which is the only officially recognized quality assurance system for tourism products. We therefore need you to partner with us to ensure that our province is ahead in terms of the number of graded establishments. The reality is that the more graded establishments we have – the more business we can bring into the province.

Working together, we can do more to promote Mpumalanga as the first tourism destination of choice, through graded establishments and excellent customer care.

Once more, thank you very much to the management and staff of the Tourism Grading Council of South Africa, for continuing to take your stakeholders very serious.

I thank you!