

MTN cellphone masts - the controversy continues

Last Wednesday they arrived in Graaff-Reinet with a full delegation to meet the locals in the Town Hall

DR STEFAN CRAMER
stefancramer@gmail.com

GRAAFF-REINET — Late last year, residents of Graaff-Reinet were suddenly alerted to plans by the mobile phone provider MTN to erect two more cellphone base stations in the residential areas of 5 Donkin Street and 188 Cradock Street on private properties.

What started as a project to improve the sketchy MTN customer experience ended up in public relations nightmare. When the Camdeboo town planner, Ndumiso Camngca, called for a public participation meeting in December, there was one notable absence: neither the project applicant MTN nor any of its contractors or consultants were present.

Angry residents demanded explanations and drafted two memoranda with detailed concerns and technical questions on radiation and heritage issues. Those memoranda remain unanswered until today.

In the new year of 2016, MTN finally sat up and listened.

Last Wednesday they arrived in Graaff-Reinet with a full delegation to meet the locals in the Town Hall.

Marius van Rensburg, Senior Property Negotiator at MTN, flew in from their corporate headquarters in Johannesburg. A radio engineer called Kelvin from the MTN Port Elizabeth office struggled to get the projector going.

Wassel van Brakel, an experienced engineer in the electromagnetic field, came as an independ-

ent consultant, appointed by MTN, to represent his multinational consulting company from Stellenbosch. They took an attentive audience of some 20, mostly senior citizens from the Horseshoe, through their technical presentations:

Why is it necessary? Why are these the most suitable locations? And why citizen's health concerns in relation with cellphone base stations close to schools are completely unfounded.

Their presentations were well prepared and accessible. However, when it came to technical details of the base stations, the small print became more and more illegible.

Nevertheless, they were also here to listen. Concerns were raised about the image of ugly plastic trees in a heritage town, cellphone masts opposite B&Bs, technical issues were discussed and questions asked. Nobody in the audience denied the need for good cellphone reception, but there are also other considerations.

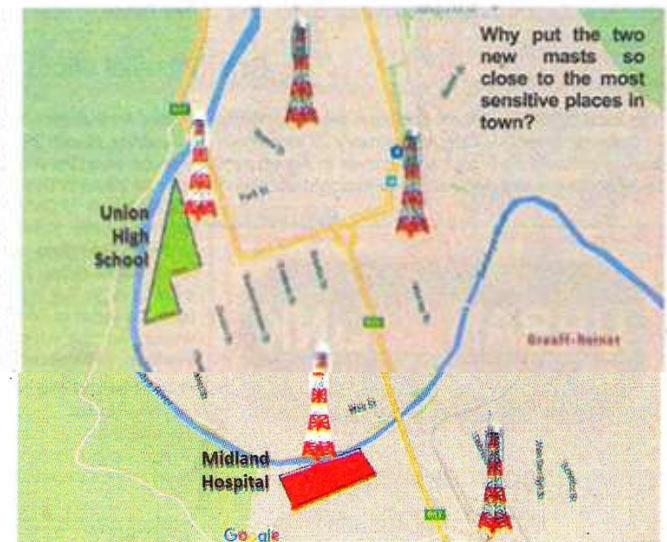
Two were most prominent and kept coming up, as they were not answered or explained sufficiently. How come MTN intends to put up two base stations in sensitive heritage areas, when the other networks obviously can do well with their current locations at Market Square, Magazine Hill and in the Industrial Area? Even more burning and emotional was this question: Why, of all places, position these base stations just as close as technically possible to a major high school and the only large hospital in town? Surely they would have studied all other options before setting up such infrastructure in possibly the most sensitive environments of the town.

Why put the two new masts so close to the most

sensitive places in town?

That is where the guys from MTN again lost the plot. The consultant passed the bucket to the property manager, he in turn to the radio engineer. Eventually it was the only company absent (Eriksson) that could answer this crucial question. Had they really studied alternatives and looked for less sensitive environments? No answer.

MTN promised to get back to the now irritated citizens, but didn't leave the impression this would change much. Plans were made, contracts were signed. It is not up to the municipality to decide. All eyes went on to the town planner, Ndumiso Camngca. When questioned whether they had sufficient technical data - more than the ignored residents - to evaluate the application, they were honest to state to have the same level of information - not enough. Furthermore, decisions of such nature would now fall under the new Spatial Planning and Land Use Management Act of 2013 (SPLUMA). A Municipal Planning Tribunal with representatives from different municipi-



pal structures would have to be convened. This tribunal, however, hadn't been set up yet. MTN's van Rensburg promised to send all technical information to the registered objectors - and of course to the municipality, now.

When the meeting was finally adjourned, everyone left with different uncertainties.

The MTN crew truly must have felt embarrassed to face a rather stubborn and well-informed citizenry, the town planner is left with a dilemma to decide whether the public participation had yielded results, and citizens were not sure, if they had been heard properly.