

ADDRESS BY MEC DUKWANA

TOUR DE FREE STATE

VENUE: PHAKISA RACE COURSE

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Today marks yet another important day in the calendar of events and the Programme of Action of the Free State Provincial Government. Today bears testimony to our commitment to change things for the better. Earlier this year, during the budget speech, we alluded to the fact that 'our greatest fear now isn't one of politics so much as of imagination'. This remark was motivated by our painful observation that the people of the Free State lack vision and inspiration and seem to have resigned themselves to be followers rather than pioneers.

At the occasion of the presentation of the policy statement and the budget vote for the Department of Economic Development, Tourism and Environmental Affairs earlier this year, we accepted the challenge of the Minister of Finance Pravin Gordan of ***'moving into new products and improving ways of producing the things we sell'***.

If we were to make any impact in unlocking the Free State Economic Potential, we had to discard the bondage our mediocrity and inadequacy and start thinking large. Failure to do so would entrench our image as social and economic dwarfs. What needs to be done is for the people of the beautiful Free State to look far into the future and be prepared to tackle ambitious projects that will have a meaningful impact on the regional economy.

We are on record lamenting little work done in leveraging the geographic location of the Free State. We believe that much more can be achieved if as the people of the Free State we could embrace competition, cooperation, innovation and hard work.

One of those ambitious projects we allude to is the Tour de Free State we announced during our budget vote earlier at the beginning of the financial year. Our efforts to stage an exciting cycling event has finally borne fruits, thank to the confidence shown to us by Mr Barry Austin, the Road Cycling Manager of Cycling South Africa. As we said on that day ***"other than being a sporting event, Tour de Free State will be a tourism activity which will contribute immensely to tourism and hospitality industry in the Free State"***

Tour de Free State is an ambitious tourism initiative by the Free State Provincial Government to unlock the Free State tourism potential through cycling. Through this initiative, we invite the people of the world, particularly in the African Continent to discover the hidden treasure of South African tourism through the paddles of the bicycle and the eyes of the professional bikers who will criss-cross the length and the breadth of the Free State.

The Free State, we believe remains the hidden treasure of the huge tourism landscape in this country. We will therefore spare no effort to ensure that people from other countries and provinces embrace the tourism offerings of the Free State.

Ladies and gentlemen, whilst Tour de Free State is not a sporting event like Tour de France, the success of the Tour de France as a special ingredients tourism promotion in France have motivated us to introduce this initiative. Talking about the intentions to start the Tour de France as early as 1899 the historian Eugene Weber predicted that, Tour de France was 'tailor made for sporting press', our prediction today is that Tour de Free State is "tailor made for tourism media".

It is our intention through the Tour de Free State to make Free State visible and alive. Writing about this event, its founder and the editor of L'Auto, Henri Desgrange once said, "***From Paris to the blue waves of the Mediterranean, from Marseille to Bordeaux, passing along the roseate and dreaming roads sleeping under the sun across the calm of the fields of the Vende'e, following the Loire, which flows on still and silent, our men are going to race madly and unflaggingly***".

Very few people differed with the notion that the publicity and Desgrange's drive to educate and improve population's knowledge of their country inspired the French to know more about their own country. In the foreword to Tour de France 1903 -2003, Eugene Weber writes;" "It (the tour) familiarized the nation with its geography. It brought life, activity, excitement into small towns where very little happened; it introduced a festive atmosphere wherever it passed; and it acquainted provincial backwaters with spectacular display previously available only in big cities".

This ladies and gentlemen, captures distinctly our vision about Tour de Free State and its impact on Free State tourism. The popularity that went with Tour de France, we are told improved the circulation of L'Auto the backers of the tour from 25 000 to almost a million in 10 years with its biggest competitor closing shop.

The Tour de Free State will start on the 24th of August from the eccentric Free State town of Parys once liked to a village when Liz Clarke a free lance journalist wrote, "***The village where culture, religion and lifestyles should be at odds with each other but strangely are not***".

The bikers will experience the spiritual rejuvenation and the serene flatlands of the Free State in the eastern parts of the Free State which another journalist, Simon Nare believes that "***God must have been in an uncompromising mood to please when he cast his eyes on this part of the world***". They will experience the natural beauty, the tranquillity, the warm people, majestic mountains and the scenic beauty of the Free State.

Their experience will include cycling on one of the world's best racing courses, Phakisa Raceway. This area, the gold capital of the country is best known for sports and weekend tourism. Cyclist will sure feel home away from home in Welkom. The last stage will bring the cyclist to heart of economic and the commercial hub the province Bloemfontein. Mangaung is the birthplace the African National Congress It is the sports capital of the province and has all major retail outlets.

It is our objective to make tourist and travellers feel at home and tour the Free State and make it the Go To destination. Africa is the main source foreign arrivals in South Africa. We therefore want to make concerted efforts to attract travellers and tourists from the African continent. We are aware that most of African tourists visit the Free State for business, through this initiative we want to change this practice and make it easy for them to spend more time in our Province.

This, however, will not be done at the expense of local or domestic tourism market. We believe that we have to sharpen our marketing strategies so as to include both lower and higher market and, improve the geographic spread and reduce seasonality and expand the range of products and services including access to travel information. We will not have succeeded in our endeavours if we are not going to cultivate the culture of travel and holiday among those who hitherto regarded travel and holiday the preserve of the well to do.

Ladies and Gentlemen, on costs to tourists, the Free State is still regarded as the least expensive tourism destination region in the country. Therefore, come to the Free State and “centre yourself at the heart of South Africa” and discover the epicentre of tourism in South Africa.

I Thank You.