

2007 Arbor City Award Ceremony
Speech by Mrs LB Hendricks, Minister of Water Affairs and Forestry
Mkhondo Local Municipality, Mpumalanga
6 December 2007

Cllr Mary Khumalo, Executive Mayor of the Mkhondo Local Municipality,
Councillors present here today,
Programme Director
Distinguished guests
Ladies and gentlemen.

I am honoured to be here in Mkhondo to mark another milestone in the greening programme of our country. We have made great strides in recent years to expand the greening of our municipalities from the past focus on towns and suburbs to also include our townships. The contribution that has been made by Local Governments across the country towards greening South Africa has been very impressive. Through the partnership of the Department of Water Affairs and Forestry and the Institute for Environment and Recreation Management, the Arbor City Award was introduced to recognise and encourage the efforts taken by Local Governments to green their municipality.

Despite all the benefits that trees bring to our community, not all people support our efforts at greening. William Blake the famous English poet writing over two hundred years ago captures it well when he said: "The tree which moves some to tears of joy is in the eyes of others only a green thing that stands in the way."

For us in the Department of Water Affairs and Forestry the more trees that are planted the better – and to show our commitment to expand the efforts at greening South Africa we launched a campaign to plant at least a million trees a year. This campaign was launched during Arbor Week earlier this year by our honourable President, Thabo Mbeki. At the launch of the campaign our President showed his commitment to greening our townships and rural areas when he spoke the lack of trees in these areas, and pointed out that even a visitor to South Africa could easily tell which areas were the former 'whites only' suburbs, as they are clearly visible by the trees. He said that what is important to us is that we address that negative legacy and plant trees across all areas and beautify our communities.

Through our million trees campaign and efforts by municipalities such as yours we will go a long way to changing the landscape in South Africa. Through this campaign we are planting trees not only to beautify our communities but also we are focusing our efforts on planting fruit trees so that in time and when these trees bear fruit, they will contribute to improving the health of our people. Although we launched this campaign in September, we had already started planting trees and so far this year we have planted 305 000 fruit trees and 107 000 ornamental indigenous trees country wide. I would like to congratulate our forestry team for what they have been able to achieve – their efforts are making a visible difference to people's lives.

Ladies and Gentlemen, this team is very organised and they have prepared a planting programme and schedule, which will indicate where plantings of these million trees will take place throughout the country. Special emphases will be given to the poverty nodal points and schools, early learning centres, old age homes and other public institutions. To support our programme, the Cabinet agreed as recently as yesterday to allocate an additional R12 million over the next three years to this important programme. We are also fortunate that private sector companies such as Total SA are supporting this effort and contributing substantial resources. The contributions by other companies, namely Malanseuns and Professional Irrigation Agencies that are also supporting greening are acknowledged and welcomed.

I have spoken on many different occasions across the country about why we want to plant trees. I would like to share these same messages with you because of the many benefits of trees: in preventing soil erosion, and the protection they provide us from the wind. One must also not forget the importance of trees for medicinal purposes, and the many economic benefits and industries that exist because of trees as well as

the social activities that take place around trees. Trees provide important habitats for survival of birds, animals and insects. Additionally our indigenous trees form an important part of tourist attraction areas and making South Africa a beautiful country.

Over and above all these benefits to our immediate environment, trees are helping us to remove pollution from the air, and they help stop the changes that are taking place in the climate because of this pollution. Across the world people are planting trees for this very reason and the United Nations have a programme to plant one billion trees.

By getting involved in the Arbour City Competition municipalities are forming part of a national and international movement towards planting more trees and greening the environment. And we are here today to award the town whose greening programmes were outstanding.

The panel judging the city or town have been consulting extensively and have maintained a high level of objectivity in the competition. Not only was the process consultative, but it also included visits to the cities and towns to conduct an inspection of the greening initiatives. The judging criteria was based on, among others, the conservation and protection of existing trees and the general attractiveness of the city or town with trees as the main feature. Also important is the percentage of indigenous trees that have been planted, as well as, the plans to plant trees in the townships over the next five years.

Honourable Mayor, ladies and gentlemen, I am informed by the adjudicators that this year's competition was very challenging and that out of a total of the eleven competing municipalities, the Mkhondo Local Municipality took the lead. I must mention that your Municipality gained the edge over the others because of the efforts in greening the townships that fall under this municipality. This is a positive move by Mkhondo Local Municipality and you need to be congratulated for that. You have shown your commitment towards the creation of liveable and dignified settlements.

Our legacy of the past where townships were ignored in greening efforts resulted in what the President referred to as clearly visible differences – even to outsiders - between the former white suburbs and the townships. By addressing this legacy we are starting to turn our townships into suburbs. The challenge for us is that there is a moving target with more and more people moving to towns and cities, which requires that we step up our efforts and greening, as well as, establishment of parks and open spaces.

At the end of the day our target should be to have towns that are filled with trees and green spaces, and beautiful to live and work in, and attractive to tourists. A process to “green” urban areas would contribute to improving the overall living conditions of urban dwellers, assist with the environmental sustainability of townships, and also contribute to the growth of the province.

To achieve this goal we need to combine our efforts and bring communities, private sector and other organisations on board. I call upon other organisations to join us in greening South Africa our country - schools, churches, and even sports clubs need to get involved in planting trees. The involvement of the Institute of Environment and Recreation Management and our private sector sponsors that I mentioned earlier are important, and with other companies and organisations joining the campaign we will have a national effort in greening our country. Provincial government plays a critical role in co-ordinating activities, and I must congratulate the Mpumalanga Provincial Department of Agriculture and Land Affairs for having developed a greening strategy for the Province.

Over and above the benefits of trees, our greening programmes can also create jobs and economic opportunities: these may be in public works programmes to plant and look after the trees, or to establish community nurseries to grow and sell trees.

In conclusion ladies and gentlemen, we are moving in the right direction, towards a greener, better and more beautiful South Africa, with trees to move us tears of joy. I would like to thank everyone for their efforts in making today's event possible.

To the winning Municipality: Well done and congratulations to you!

I thank you.