

16 September 2019

SRK Consulting (South Africa) (Pty) Ltd
The Administrative Building
Albion Spring
183 Main Rd
Rondebosch 7700
Cape Town

Attention: Amy Hill – Environmental Consultant

Comments on the River Club Redevelopment Pre-Application BAR in reference to Erf 151832, City of Cape Town, and adjacent properties (Erf 26426, Erf 108936, Erf 26427, Erf 15326 Rem, Erf 26169, Erf 26170, Erf 26171, Erf 26172, Erf 26173, Erf 26174 and Erf 26175)

- a) DEA&DP Ref. No.: 16/3/3/6/7/2/A7/17/3104/16
- b) HWC Case No.: 15112504WD1217E
- c) DWS Ref. No.: 16/2/7/G22/A/11 and WU9026 River Club)

The owner and operator of The River Club in Observatory, Cape Town, the Liesbeek Leisure Properties Trust, LLPT, wishes to redevelop the site for residential, commercial, institutional and associated uses. LLPT appointed SRK Consulting (South Africa) Pty Ltd, SRK, to manage the Environmental Assessment in terms of the National Environmental Management Act. Between 2016 and 2019, the regulations regarding Environmental Impact Assessments changed and, as a result, the River Club requires what is called a 'Basic Assessment' (BA) rather than a full Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA).

As an interested and affected party, the National Research Foundation (NRF), a statutory entity established in terms of the National Research Foundation Act (Act No. 23 of 1998) acting through its National Facility the South African Astronomical Observatory (SAAO), is required to pass comments on the Basic Assessment Report (BAR).

Previous and current position

The SAAO was deeply concerned with the proposal as presented in the plan dated November 2017 and noted its comments in the reply dated 6 March 2018. Further comments, concerns and objections were presented on 2 May 2019 in response to the revised HIA report, dated 19 March

2019, in particular emphasising the visual heritage impacts of the proposals on the SAAO National Heritage Site, and quite possibly a future UNESCO Cultural World Heritage Site.

The SAAO is of the opinion that the above mentioned concerns raised in its submissions dated 6 March 2018 and 2 May 2019 are largely still valid. SAAO appreciates the 40m set back for the proposed buildings in Precinct 1, partially decreased heights thereof, toning down of arguments based on the height of existing transient tree canopy, and other mitigating efforts taken in the last revision. However, SAAO is of the opinion that mitigation of the heritage impact of the scale and form of building footprints facing onto the riverine corridor and alongside the Observatory are still insufficient.

Furthermore, SAAO continues to find compelling those arguments highlighting the sometimes intangible cultural and historical heritage of the open green space in the wider Two Rivers Urban Park (TRUP) area, where the modern scientific history of the last 200 years, that SAAO represents, quite uniquely folds into the fascinating pre-colonial and early colonial history of our City. TRUP has been identified by Heritage Western Cape (HWC) as at least Grade II. This is a space perhaps deserving a more nuanced approach to development and engaging with the wider public seeking inspiration and connection. Concepts for connecting the multi-faceted cultural and historical continuum from First Nation people through Colonial history to modern science, each reaching to the stars in their way *in the very same area*, should be given a chance.

The proposed development should also be seen to be using the Two Rivers Urban Park Contextual Framework and Phase One Environmental Management Plan that was adopted by ordinary resolution in a meeting of the Council of the City of Cape Town held on 27 August 2003.

Background and heritage Impact

The SAAO is a working National Research Foundation facility with over 100 staff, a residential site of half dozen households, located on the historic property directly adjacent to The River Club. The Observatory was established in 1820.

The SAAO has considerable historical, scientific, aesthetic, architectural and social significance. On 21 December 2018 the South African Heritage Resources Agency (SAHRA) declared the site, in terms of section 27 (5) of the National Heritage Resources Act (No. 25 of 1999), as a National Heritage Site. SAHRA states that SAAO has played a highly significant role in scientific research as the oldest permanent observatory in the Southern Hemisphere.

The Observatory is associated with several astronomical advances of international significance since the 1830s. It has considerable aesthetic significance with several architecturally notable buildings and a distinctive dome typology set within a wooded landscape at the confluence of the Liesbeek and the Black Rivers. The Main Building and McClean dome structure forms the central shaft of space in a North-South orientation.

Following the recent declaration as a National Heritage Site, there is a strong possibility for the Observatory to be also declared a UNESCO Cultural World Heritage Site. The process is beginning for the site being first included on the Tentative List, and the SAAO has been encouraged to rapidly go forward with the process by SAHRA, by the SA government, by the International

Astronomical Union, and by UNESCO contacts. This wide support for the initiative is motivated by the small number of Cultural Sites in South Africa (only 5, Robben Island being one of them), and by very few astronomical sites globally eligible, realistically, for the prestigious list – there are currently a dozen historical astronomy-related UNESCO sites, such as the Giza Pyramids and Stonehenge, but only one observatory still in use, albeit mostly as a museum, the Greenwich Royal Observatory.

The revised plans correctly emphasise the outstanding heritage significance of the Observatory as a recently declared national heritage site with reference to its historical, scientific, architectural and aesthetic value. It also emphasises the Observatory's sense of place as a 'centre piece' on a spur of land at the confluence of the Liesbeek and Black Rivers. Notwithstanding the positive heritage impacts of the proposed rehabilitation and pedestrian linked Liesbeek Riverine Corridor forming the western boundary of the Observatory, these impacts do not outweigh the negative impacts of the proposed development in Precinct 1 on the landscape setting of the Observatory.

Moreover, the SAAO is of the opinion that the Observatory cannot be solely seen as a standalone entity, as important as it is, but should be considered as an integral part of the wider TRUP area. In the recent special meeting of the Impact Assessment Committee of the HWC, held on 22 August 2019, and where SAAO was also present, it was noted that the HIA arguments base too much significance on other values while downplaying the cultural ones. According to the National Khoisan Legacy Project, the site has been identified as an important area for the First Nation people. Importance should be granted to the intangible heritage significance of the entire Liesbeek Corridor. Ideas regarding concepts to develop an attraction connecting the unique and fascinating cultural and historical continuum from First Nation people through Colonial history to modern science reaching to the stars, has not been given even a chance to date.

Visual Impact on SAAO

SAAO appreciates the 40m set back for the proposed buildings in Precinct 1. However, mitigation of the heritage impact of the scale and form of building footprints facing onto the riverine corridor and alongside the Observatory are still insufficient.

With reference to p. 15 of the BAR, the heights of the proposed buildings in Precinct 1 shows anticipated heights of between 26.2m and 54.2m. Although some alteration was observed since the previous version of the Visual Impact proposal, the concerning fact remains that the vertical angle at which the closer obscuring buildings will limit the visual-spatial field currently experienced from the Observatory. The effect is compounded by the 'urban wall' created by the proposed densely packed individual buildings blocking any horizontal viewing angle between adjacent buildings from any single proximity vantage point at the Observatory.

Hence, the scale and form of proposed development in Precinct 1 still presents an 'urban wall' interface with the Liesbeek Riverine Corridor and the Observatory and results in the hemming in of the landscape setting of the Observatory. It stands in dramatic contrast to the loose arrangement of Observatory buildings set within a green matrix and tree canopy well suited to the concept of a parkland setting associated with the adjacent riverine corridors.

Finally, it should be made clear that the visual-spatial field of the Observatory is greater than the cadastral boundaries of the site. It is defined by its stand-alone qualities embedded within a matrix of green and conceptualised by the very nature of the work of an observatory as being outward looking. This visual-spatial field is experienced from the periphery of the Observatory as well as from the outside looking towards the site from various vantage points. The current visual-spatial field contributes significantly to a sense of quietude of the Observatory within an urban metropolitan context.

Environmental concerns

Referring to section 6(b) on pg 63 of the BAR, SAAO is concerned that the raising of the level of the River Club area by between 1.5m and 3.5m above the current ground level by necessity would cause more flooding on the lower-lying SAAO areas, both on the Liesbeek and Black River sides. Although we are not experts in the subject, we wish to continue to raise the issue. This will affect the sensitivity of the Raapenberg wetlands, rated as important from an avifaunal perspective. The salt marsh systems such as the *Sarcocornia capenses* pans in this wetland are highly vulnerable to inundation changes, even to slight increases in the water level. There are nine endemic or near-endemic wetlands species, according to Coastal and Environmental Consultants, and if inundation of the rare renosterveld wetlands becomes more perennial, particularly along the SAAO eastern boundary, it would compromise this habitat.

Summary

As noted in our response dated 6 March 2018 and 2 May 2019, SAAO does not oppose smart and sensitive development in the area, but we are far from convinced that the concerns raised by us, and other stakeholders, are properly addressed with the new BAR dated July 2019, which continues to propose dense and high buildings in the area, in close proximity to the SAAO. This remains the main direct concern of SAAO - the drastic loss of the visual-spatial field of the Observatory, the hemming in, by means of an 'urban wall', of a National Heritage site, and a possible future global Cultural Heritage site.

Furthermore, SAAO shares many concerns raised by other local stakeholders regarding lack of respect for pre-colonial and more recent history, for sense of place and space in the unique cultural and historical TRUP area, for preservation of unique local flora (*Moraea Aristata*) and fauna (*Amietophrynus Pantherinus*), for the need of a green breathing area amidst an otherwise highly urbanised area, and dangers of over-commercialisation of this significant heritage area.

16 September 2019

Sincerely,



Prof Petri Vaisanen
Director, South African Astronomical Observatory