

125th Anniversary of the founding of Johannesburg

14 November 2011

Speech by the Executive Mayor of the City of Johannesburg, Clr Mpho Parks Tau, on the occasion of the Johannesburg 125th Anniversary of the founding of Johannesburg, Sci-Bona Discovery Centre, Newtown – Johannesburg

Programme Director

MMC for Community Development: Clr Chris Vondo

Members of the Mayoral Committee

Fellow Councillors

City Manager: Mr Trevor Fowler

The Business Sector

Managers and Officials

Members of the Community

Distinguished Guests

The Media

Ladies and Gentlemen

Programme Director, there are moments in history that require revisiting. When we do so we discover that a systematic and critical research on our past reveals an unusual wealth of information. As we do so, we discover knowledge and deep heroism that inspires us to do more.

Johannesburg grew from tent town to wood and iron shanties to bricks and mortar buildings at the pace of an historical wink of an eye. Within less than two decades since its formal proclamation the broad outlines of the City, as we know it today was already well established.

This City has also continued to shape our history as it evolved over decades.

One of the youngest major Cities in the world, Johannesburg marks its 125th anniversary this year. Johannesburg was founded in 1886 as a result of the discovery of gold on the Witwatersrand. So it is for a good reason that Johannesburg is known to many as "Egoli" (Zulu) or "Gauteng" (Sotho), both names meaning "the Place of Gold".

Probably no City in the world has grown faster. Powered by the world's greatest gold-rush, Johannesburg soon grew into a bustling metropolis. Before the discovery of gold the landscape of

Johannesburg was dotted with a number of African homesteads and a few white-owned farmhouses.

Compared to what followed, Joburg's beginnings looked small and humble. The mining camp of 1886 covered a few square kilometres and had a population of a few thousand people. Already in 1886 there were 14 liquor stores and one hotel – but no sanitation or health services.

Johannesburg was founded as a mining camp towards the end of 1886, a few months after the discovery of the Main reef in Langlaagte. Trying to fix a precise date for the founding of Johannesburg can be open to some interpretation and debate. Some argue that Johannesburg began in September, while others say it was founded in October.

However, Programme Director, Joburg's anniversary does not come down to a single date. The fact is that, a series of important events moved very quickly towards the end of 1886:

In September President Paul Kruger declared the area as public diggings.

Then on the 4th of October came the proclamation of Randjeslaagte - the original residential area where Johannesburg was founded.

In November, the first official Diggers Committee was sworn into office - representing the first local government structure (and arguably a forerunner of the Johannesburg City Council).

December saw the first sale of stands (actually the sale of leases) in Johannesburg.

Hot on the heels of the discovery of gold, Johannesburg attracted large numbers of gold prospectors, fortune-hunters and ordinary work-seekers. Arriving in their thousands, and coming from far and wide, there were a variety of people, including blacks and whites. This mix of humanity gave the young town a cosmopolitan character from the start.

The government of Paul Kruger became increasingly fearful of the great influx of foreigners, many of them English-speaking – who they called "uitlanders" (aliens). Johannesburg, springing up as it did, suddenly, very suddenly in the midst of the Boer Republic in 1886, was to the Boers an alien city. President Kruger became increasingly unhappy and fearful about the influence of a growing population of foreigners, regarded as wild adventurers who knew only one god – gold.

The authorities of the Boer Republic consoled themselves that the the gold would run out, the town would not last, and then the "Uitlanders" – the aliens – would leave.

But Johannesburg did not go away.

Within six years four years of its birth, Johannesburg was already the biggest town in South Africa, with large buildings, street lighting, suburban mansions, and shops to rival those in Cape Town. By 1896 – when Johannesburg was just 10 years old – its population had risen to 100 000.

Despite President Kruger, Johannesburg went on to become the most cosmopolitan place in Africa. No other place in Southern Africa contained such a varied cultural mix. It was this robust blend of nations, cultures and languages that gave Johannesburg its unique character. The energy that this generated – economic social and political energy - was to drive much of South Africa's subsequent history.

To us the year 1886 remains an important milestone and a reason to celebrate the history of a small little mining town that grew into Africa's premier City in the very short space of only 125 years.

The people of Joburg and indeed South Africa have so much to be proud of. We have truly established a World-Class City that can truly compete on almost any level with our counterparts across the globe in a very short space of time. And very little of this could not have been achieved without the vision of the people of Johannesburg.

Programme Director on the 20th of October 2010, the Johannesburg Council unanimously adopted the Joburg 2040 Growth and Development Strategy. As people of Johannesburg, we have agreed on a common vision for the future. The vision has been developed by capturing the important values, aspirations and ideals that various stakeholders expressed throughout the GDS outreach process.

Our collective vision is about:

"Johannesburg - a World Class African City of the Future – a vibrant, equitable African city, strengthened through its diversity; a city that provides real quality of life; a city that provides sustainability for all its citizens; a resilient and adaptive society."

Joburg. My City – Our Future!

In closing, I leave you with the words of R.V. Selope Thema, newspaper editor, intellectual and African nationalist:

"There can be no doubt that the historian will point to the period between the discovery of gold on the Witwatersrand and the establishment of the City of Johannesburg as a turning point in the history not only of Southern Africa but of the whole continent".

Thank you

