

Roadworks ahead, drivers cautioned

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THE roadworks between Okahandja and Wilhelmstal have been a source of consternation for many a driver. Republikein spoke to Mr. Wilfried Schmidt, the contract manager of Namibia Construction, to elaborate on the current state of affairs.

Q: Everybody wants to know: How long will construction still continue?

A: Until the end of August, beginning September 2010. However, it also depends on the rain since tar work cannot be carried out if it is wet, or when there is a strong possibility of rain. While we hope for more rain for farmers' sake, for our own sake it would help if it dries up.

At the moment there is a shortage of bitumen in South Africa and therefore also in Namibia, mainly due to annual maintenance shut downs of refineries as well as a marked increase in construction work in the RSA before the World Cup. This means that the final driving surface, the tarmac, cannot be speedily completed.

Q: Why hasn't a bypass been constructed? Would this not have eased traffic congestion?

A: As readers would have noticed, as on most upgrading or new projects, a bypass or detour is constructed to handle traffic. On this project part of the existing road is being used as the deviation, whilst the widening is done on the other side. Once this has been completed, the traffic will be placed on the newly constructed road, whilst the remaining piece of the old road is dug up, reworked and new layers added. This is done to save the cost of a complete bypass, but also because it would be difficult to accommodate the traffic through river beds in the rainy season.

Think of the 11 bridges! The terrain over the first 30 km from Okahandja is very rugged and building a bypass would have scarred the adjoining area for ever. At the same time, the fibre optic (underground telephone line) cable runs along the southern side of the road.

Damage to this would result in the coast being cut off communications wise from the rest of the country. Another issue is a shortage of good road building material in this area and it would have been difficult to source all that extra material to construct a bypass of over 77 km.

The construction we are using may sound practical and easy, but it is nerve-wracking since there are about 1 500 vehicles that use this section of road every day, passing within very close proximity of workers and machines.

As you can imagine, this is very dangerous especially since most vehicles do not abide by the speed restrictions. If you have a 22 m interlink truck rushing past you at 80 km/hr within one meter of where you are standing, you will know what I mean.

Q: Have you made any special arrangements for the Easter weekend?

A: Special arrangements are in place at all times. There is a fulltime traffic safety officer in the contractor's employ and the resident engineer has to approve all deviations and the relevant signage prior to opening a section of bypass/detour/ deviation to the public. All this is done in accordance with the Road Ordinance.

The speed limits laid down are also in accordance with the Road Ordinance. It should be noted that the robots on site work on a different cycle as those in town. For example, if the traffic lights are 1 km apart and robot A is green and robot B red, traffic will proceed from A towards B. Once A turns red, B will remain red for a while, so that all vehicles between the robots will be out of that 1 km section of single lane road. Only then will B turn green. These times are set.

Time and again drivers think that the robots are not working correctly and skip the red light. Most accidents that have occurred on the construction site have been alcohol related, with speed being the second major cause of accidents.

All accidents are investigated by Nampol and on most days there is a traffic officer patrolling or doing speed control on this section of road. From a practical point of view, we had hoped to open another 10 km of new construction (the northern side of the road) before Easter, but with the shortage of bitumen, this will definitely not be possible.

Q: What is the total cost of the project?

A: N\$300 million. This includes everything, from the widening of 11 bridges and more than 350 culverts up to and including the final surfacing and road marking.

Q: We understand that a second phase will also be carried out. Can you elaborate?

A: The second phase is only going out on tender next month. Work may resume in July/August 2010, if awarded on time.

Q: How many contractors are involved with the project?

A: The NNC Joint Venture is made up of Nexus Civils and Namibia Construction, with Namibia Construction being the lead partner. Since there was no 100% Namibian, in other words local civil construction company that could have tackled this project on their own at the time, it was decided to join forces and tender for the project as a joint venture.

About 10 small, medium and micro entrepreneur (SMME) contractors were engaged in the construction of the stormwater culverts. This was a condition set by the client, in order to support smaller local contractors.

Q: Can you give readers an idea how many jobs have been created through this project?

A: At the peak of the contract nearly 450 people of all walks of life were employed. At present there are about 350. The client encourages labour intensive type of work, which is not always fast, but results in larger number of unemployed being given work. Training for a diversity of operations was encouraged and paid for by the client as well.

Q: Do you have any message for road users?

A: We kindly request them to take note of the press release as advertised in the Republikein today. All we can ask is for them to consider their fellow road users and adhere to the speed limits and road signs.

At the same time, we are very appreciative to see how many drivers do actually take extra care, not only for their own lives, but also for construction workers on site. We wish every road user a happy Easter and safe journey wherever they may be travelling.