

Denneoord emergency airstrip is safe and a major boost to regional firefighting efforts

Wednesday, 06 December 2017

Last Updated Wednesday, 06 December 2017

The George Municipality is proud of its role in establishing Eden's first dedicated emergency firefighting airstrip in Denneoord and is confident its operations will be safe for residents in its flight circuit.

The municipality will officially open the Denneoord Aerial Fire Base tomorrow (6 December 2017) together with the Southern Cape Fire Protection Association and in partnership with Working on Fire and Eden District Municipality. The opening will coincide with the launch of the Southern Cape summer fire season.

George Municipality Fire Chief Neels Barnard said having a dedicated airstrip for firefighting aeroplanes was a major step forward for firefighting efforts in George and Eden as quick response to fires was essential. "Having a dedicated emergency airstrip means firefighting planes can respond much faster than they would be able to if they were stationed at an airport where they would have to wait in line for a runway along with other aircraft. This is especially applicable during the summer fire season which coincides with the very busy holiday season when hundreds of flights are scheduled at commercial airports.

"George is privileged to have this facility on our doorstep as our proximity to the airbase will ensure very quick response. During test runs last week, response to the site of a veld fire in Wilderness took five minutes, and allowed for quick reconnaissance and appropriate response," said Mr Barnard.

The aerial base is operated by Working on Fire, a programme funded by the Department of Environmental Affairs, where five aeroplanes and a chopper will be stationed for the fire season from December 2017 to April 2018. Municipalities in the Eden District Municipality, in association with the Southern Cape Fire Protection Association, will work with Working on Fire on a call-out basis as services are required. The airbase consists of a 1000mx30m runway, 20m-diameter helipad, firebase office (existing municipal building upgraded), hangars, taxiways and water refilling point.

Mr Barnard said residents of neighbourhoods in the flight circuit area of the Denneoord airstrip could be rest-assured all safety precautions were being taken and flyovers, landings and take-offs were all within the legal parameters set out in the South African Civil Aviation Act. "Flights are being monitored by Air Traffic Control at the George Airport to ensure pilots adhere to the relevant standard operating procedures, which in turn are attached to approval from the Central Airspace Management Unit (CAMU) – the authority in South Africa responsible for the management of air traffic flow and capacity management.

"While the landing and take-offs may feel quite close to some residents, they are legal and safe. Pilots operating emergency aircraft are exceptionally experienced and qualified – the very nature of the jobs they have chosen are aimed at the rescue, protection and well-being of people and property.

"We reiterate the Denneoord airstrip is not an airport, but a dedicated emergency airbase for firefighting purposes only. Flights will be reactive only, which means if the aircraft takes off, there is a fire

somewhere in the Eden District Municipal Area that requires aerial assistance and support.

“Like

any disaster management situation, emergency aircraft may temporarily impact on residents surrounding the airstrip, but we believe the benefits of having life and property saving firefighting aircraft on standby during the high-risk fire season outweighs temporary impacts such as non-continual noise (which are exempted by the Western Cape Noise Control Regulations arising from emergency situations). We only need to remember the thousands of people who were displaced and left homeless during the Garden Route fires in June 2017 to understand the airstrip’s importance,” said Mr Barnard.

Authorisation

for the development of an airstrip for emergency firefighting services by the Western Cape Government Department of Environmental Affairs and Development Planning was preceded by an environmental impact assessment - which took into consideration aspects such as noise, impacts on birds and animals, waste management and Civil Aviation Authority compliance - and included a public participation process.

The

Denneoord site was the only available municipal land long enough for the establishment of an airstrip and with an available water source and infrastructure to house emergency aircraft and fill them in the required time for the firefighting response to be effective and efficient.

This Press Release was issued by George Municipality