

Durban's Maritime Cluster is seaborne

It took quite a bit longer to get going than originally expected but Durban's maritime cluster was finally launched at the beginning of December.

The cluster, which aims at representing all shades of interest within the Durban maritime industry, is an initiative of the eThekweni Municipality's (Durban) Economic Development Unit, and arose out of a realisation that Africa's busiest port city required a broad-based grouping of all the elements from within the Durban maritime industry that does business within the port and in shipping.

The maritime industry is certainly one of the largest single identifiable industries in the greater Durban area, employing thousands of people directly and even larger numbers indirectly. This leaves a sizeable and economically important chunk of the KZN economy dependent on what happens in and around the harbour precincts. This effect is felt even further afield into neighbouring provinces and countries that use the port as well.

As a result an immense responsibility falls on the respective stakeholders – the City, Transnet National Ports Authority and Transnet Port Terminals, the Bidvest and Grindrod Groups which operate a significant number of terminals in the port, the Fresh Produce Terminals which operates the country's largest single citrus export facility, the numerous companies involved in the Cutler Complex representing the Island View oil industry, the South African

Sugar Association, the ship repair industry and various other private terminal operators and service providers operating in and around the port. An enormous responsibility for the efficient operating of the port also falls on the transport companies – Transnet Freight Rail and its re-emerging rail services and the widespread road transport industry. Also involved are the service providers to the industry and this list is huge.

But until recently there has not been a combined forum that represents all stakeholders from one end of the industry to the other, leaving a number of interests to feel that their particular discipline was not considered when decisions affecting the future of the port were made. This was especially so when it came to forward planning for the harbour when decisions were made in isolation of various groupings, to the detriment of not only those groups but also of Durban as a significant world port city.

It was these factors that led to the formation in 2008 of the eThekweni Maritime Cluster. Although initially sponsored by the city, the intention is that the maritime fraternity will take over financial responsibility of the cluster within a few years, creating an independent representative body in which all manner of concerns and interests can be raised and debated. The cluster will also give Durban a strong voice in protecting its maritime interests nationally.

The signing off on the launch of the cluster has been delayed for a number of reasons but in the interim a lot of backroom

work has been completed, including the drawing up of a master business plan for the cluster and the identification and selection of co-funders. Among the directions the cluster will take is included that of skills development in which it is intended that established educational facilities and universities and training SETA's can be strengthened on a project by project basis. In this respect Durban has several unique opportunities among its universities and the Transnet School of Ports (the former Transnet Academy), in addition to a number of respected private training institutions.

Already involved in the cluster are most of the existing maritime associations and organisations like SAASOA which represents ship owners and agents, SAAFF (South African Association of Freight Forwarders-KZN), the local Harbour Carriers Association which is affiliated to the national Road Freight Association, and the ship repair and ship building operators, which have also formed a cluster of their own. The cluster has already identified several key projects and opportunities for involvement.

Jannie Roux, managing director of Bidfreight Port Operators has been elected chairman of the eThekweni Maritime Cluster Board of Directors.

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Editorial by Terry Hutson.