

Resilience in the face of adversity

PRASA is rebuilding passenger rail services to position it as the backbone of public transport, writes Hishaam Emeran

The Passenger Rail Agency of South Africa has made significant progress in its quest to revitalise the country's passenger rail service.

Since 2020/21, PRASA has recovered over 20 lines nationally, ensuring that trains are running on most of the critical lines. Trains are now operational on 26 lines, making stops at 230 refurbished stations. PRASA aims to rebuild and recover most of its corridors by the end of the current financial year.

Trains are now running in Pretoria, Leralla to Germiston, Johannesburg to Naledi, Durban to KwaMashu, Umlazi, Cato Ridge, Cape Town to Bellville, and Cape Town to Simonstown, to name a few.

The agency's most significant achievement yet is connecting the three big metropolitan areas in Gauteng. Trains are now running from Pretoria and Ekurhuleni to Johannesburg Park Station. Since their reopening, these lines have rapidly grown passenger numbers, reflecting the demand for train services in these areas.

The recovery of certain sections of the Central Line represents an important success for PRASA, given the many challenges the agency has faced in recovering this corridor after parts of it were illegally occupied. The most striking of these were the informal housing structures erected within the rail reserve.

The Central Line potentially transports some 40% of Cape Town's passenger train travellers, and its non-availability made passenger rail services non-optimal. PRASA was able to implement an effective stakeholder engagement plan to enable it to run trains from Cape Town to Langa, Langa to Nyanga. While this Presidential Corridor has not been fully recovered, PRASA proved the skeptics wrong by implanting its much-vaunted Bekela strategy to get the buy-in



Cape Town Station

of the affected communities. Work is underway to recover Nyanga to Khayelitsha, Kapteinsklip in Mitchells Plein to ensure that this important corridor is fully recovered.

PRASA's internal teams and contractor teams have put in the hours to recover critical lines such as this one and many others. PRASA is proud that its work has had a positive impact on communities and the economy.

Positively impacting the economy

We are determined to continue our efforts to reduce the percentage of household income spent on transportation, alleviate traffic congestion, and positively impact both the public and the economy.

Urban rail is pivotal in driving economic activity by transporting millions of people to and from their workplaces daily. Since rebuilding and reopening services, we have seen a substantial increase in the commuters we serve. The organisation is ready to grow its passenger numbers in line with its mandate.

Rebuilding our infrastructure is not just about meeting immediate transportation needs; it's about creating a solid foundation for economic growth, job creation, and improving livelihoods. Our rebuild projects have injected over R3.6 billion into the economy, creating over 6 000 job opportunities, with 211 Small, Medium, and Micro-sized Enterprises (SMMEs) appointed. Among these job opportunities, 856 were for

women and 4 061 were youth employment opportunities. The positive impact of resuming passenger rail services on the livelihoods of commuters who spend some 40-50% of their income on transport cannot be overstated. By running train services on the reopened lines, PRASA saves commuters thousands of rands in travel costs, as a train ticket costs less than a litre of petrol. For example, a trip from Germiston to Johannesburg now costs just R7.50, easing the financial burden on commuters who would pay considerably more for alternative modes of transport.

Modern high-tech trains to revolutionise the commuter rail experience

As we rebuild our passenger rail infrastructure, we are also ushering in a new era of modernisation in our rail services.

PRASA has introduced modern electric trains on the reopened corridors. These state-of-the-art trains are manufactured on the East Rand at the Gibela factory. These trains have built-in safety features, including automated doors that ensure that the train does not move when the doors are open.

These trains are also equipped with advanced safety features, including CCTV cameras, demonstrating that safety remained a top priority throughout our journey. These trains have revolutionised the South African commuter rail experience for our passengers.

Safety and security are the bedrock of our recovery

To enhance the safety and protection of its assets, PRASA has implemented an integrated security plan.

Security has been beefed up on trains, stations, and on the platforms. Since its introduction, the comprehensive security plan has resulted in a 70% reduction in security-related incidents. Depot safety has received attention, with the installation of new perimeter walls, along with the implementation of an Integrated Security Management System (ISMS) that includes seismic detection systems at all depots.

Securing long-term financial stability through the secondary mandate

PRASA is leveraging its secondary mandate to secure long-term financial stability by unlocking value from its extensive property portfolio and real estate associated with stations. This initiative is driven via PRASA Corporate Real Estate Solutions (CRES) Intersite Investment (Intersite). PRASA's property portfolio comprises land, residential, and office spaces, covering 4 500ha with a market value of over R5 billion. This makes PRASA one of the biggest intermodal transport property owners in South Africa.

PRASA has entered into a co-investment partnership worth R1.2 billion with Eris Property Group to develop 3 200-bed student

accommodation at the PRASA-owned Cape Town station while revitalising the retail precinct. This development, which is nearing completion, is one of the examples of how PRASA is repositioning its stations as places where people can live, work, and play whilst creating much-needed revenue for us.

Behind every inch track laid, electrical cable wired, and station rebuilt, there is a dedicated and skilled workforce composed of hardworking men and women who have put in the hours to recover the rail network.

PRASA's employees and skilled contractors have been responsible for the pieces of work that together result in this recovery. The milestones are a tribute to our resilience as an organisation.

The PRASA Board of Control has remained focused on ensuring governance within the organisation during this period of rapid recovery. They have played an important role in restoring stability and credibility to the entity.

PRASA's turnaround is irreversible and even though there is still much to be done, it is clear that with the support of our communities, partners, and stakeholders, PRASA is steadily bringing back a modern, affordable, and efficient passenger rail network for the benefit of commuters and the country as a whole. ▲

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