

PRASA's sustainable turnaround on track

The turnaround of the Passenger Rail Agency of South Africa (PRASA) has revitalised one of the most important State-Owned Entities (SOEs). Over the past eighteen months, PRASA has recovered the bulk of its corridors, reopened rail lines, refurbished stations and delivered a markedly improved performance across most of its parameters.

Commuter satisfaction has shot up, with many commuters going onto social media to share their positive experiences on PRASA's new trains. On platforms such as X, commuters regularly post photos of their trips, capturing the scenic nature of many of the routes along the PRASA network.

"The magic of rail has always been what I most look forward to when I get up. I always to take the train to work and when I was a student living in KwaMashu, I travelled by train" says Mayo Ndlovu, who recently relocated to Cape Town, where he takes the train as much as possible. He is not alone, citizens who travel by train are warmly



beginning to experience a new PRASA. Ray Mahlaka, a Cape Town-based journalist writes, "back on the glorious train in Cape Town. Still R9 to commute from the deep South to Cape

Town CBD, a more than 30-km journey. The train is clean, safe and reliable (ish). When SOEs work and are service-orientated, they can improve quality of life". Mthembukazi retorts, "do you

ride past St James station? That's the most glorious ride... from Muizenburg to Simons-town. It's best enjoyed with ice cream from those coffee shops on Kalk Bay Main Rd."

Thiathu Manenzhe observes, "one cannot underestimate the power of public transportation systems done right. They're the heartbeat of the city and make the city work".

These testimonials capture the extent to which PRASA's service meets and in many ways exceeds the expectations of those who ride the trains.

It is clear that a thriving PRASA means our people can reach their destinations quickly, affordably and safely. PRASA is mindful of the impact of high fuel prices on the pockets of South Africans and it takes seriously its role to give commuters a mode of transport that helps them travel safely and affordably. Social media platforms provide a snapshot of the positive impact that a healthy PRASA is making on the daily lives of those who use its passenger train services.

The satisfaction is not limited to those who are on social media, but is captured amongst riders who share their experiences with PRASA staff when a new line is formally launched. Customer service surveys also reveal a high level of customer satisfaction. The upside of this recovery is that commuters who prefer to travel by train save at least 50% compared to what they would pay for other modes of transport.

The most economically vulnerable are able to travel safely and affordably on PRASA's trains.

PRASA Group Chief Executive Officer Hishaam Emeran says he is pleased with the progress of the turnaround.

"We are running PRASA's modern new trains on most of our critical corridors, and passengers have returned in their numbers. We have also bolstered capacity across all aspects of our service. In the last financial year, we achieved 59% of our performance target, a significant increase from the previous year's 19%. In a historical first for us, we achieved our CAPEX [capital expenditure] spend, ensuring that we execute our capital programme and stimulate the rail industry and its support sectors," says Emeran.

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pectations of our stakeholders were high. We owe it to ourselves and the people of South Africa to build a PRASA that we can be truly proud of – an institution that embod-

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ies our values and represents the best of who we are as a people," says Emeran.

The agency has detailed plans to further improve the service by fixing signalling, modernising ticketing, upgrading more stations and bolstering an already much improved security plan. Performance indicators in the current financial year show that PRASA is building on the successes of the past year, with its performance already indicating that the agency will meet and even exceed most of its agreed targets.

This is good news for travellers and citizens who want a passenger rail service that is efficient, modern, and safe. By

the end of 2022/23, PRASA had recovered 18 rail lines. During the same period 58 stations were revitalised, 57 new train sets were delivered and 197 existing train sets were config-

ured. These solid achievements show that PRASA is hard at work. The number of lines back in operation is expected to increase substantially at the end of 2023/24.

Recovering critical corridors

Critical corridors have been recovered in PRASA's areas of operation in the Western Cape, KwaZulu-Natal and Gauteng. They include parts of the Central Line in Cape Town, Umlazi to Durban, Saulsville to Pretoria, Mabopane to Pretoria, Naledi to Johannesburg and Leralla to Germiston. Reopening these essential and historic lines has revived passenger rail in vital

metropolitan areas. Corridor recovery is a complex undertaking that involves recovery of the infrastructure, including the perway, installation of the overhead traction equipment, (OHTE) fixing of substations and a host of other elements that enable the safe and efficient running of PRASA's modern trains. The work is done by PRASA's highly skilled internal teams as well as experienced contractors.

Work is underway to recover and, where necessary, reinstall the signalling system and to fully reinstate the central nerve center. A fully functional signalling system will ensure that PRASA runs trains at the frequency required to move high passenger numbers safely.

Job creation

Job creation has been one of the highlights of this successful recovery programme by PRASA. Nearly 9 000 direct jobs and job opportunities have been created through rolling stock, infrastructure and operational projects. A further 12 689 indirect jobs have been created through these programmes. Jobs were also created through the establishment of cooperatives focused on cleaning, horticulture and maintenance of stations. »



Commitment to safety

PRASA's much vaunted safety campaign – Asiphephe, aligns with the conditions of the agency's safety permit. But it goes beyond compliance issues to reflect PRASA's commitment to lower safety incidents and improve personal safety on its trains and at its stations. Walling and fencing projects as well as community awareness programmes, have led to a reduction in the number of safety incidents. But more needs to be done to improve safety. This is no easy task given South Africa has over 2 230 km of passenger rail track, excluding the intercity main railway lines owned by Transnet.

PRASA's investment in safety practices includes on-board ambassadors who promote safety. Their presence on board the trains contributes to physical safety, especially for vulnerable groups, including women and young people. Onboard security personnel, including the South African Police Service, CCTV cameras and onboard driver-managed communication bring an added sense of security. These measures have significantly reduced safety and security-related incidents on our new trains.

The protection services have achieved a remarkable turnaround in the security of both assets and people. We have implemented a security strategy

that combines technology and skills to significantly reduce the number of security incidents.

PRASA's new rolling stock programme reflects the achievable ambition of the agency to modernise its assets, upgrade its infrastructure and bring travellers the train of the future. A total of 165 of PRASA's new trains have been built and delivered for use in Gauteng, Western Cape and KwaZulu-Natal. These state-of-the-art electric multiple unit trains are built on the East Rand at the Gibela factory.

PRASA's turnaround is also accelerating the building of new depots and upgrading existing ones to ensure that the new fleet is staged and maintained in appropriate facilities. These

depots have state-of-the-art fencing and walling to ensure the safety and security of these national assets. The turnaround of PRASA's bus service, Auto-pax, remains an essential focus for the organisation. Autopax is a vital cog in the integrated transport matrix as it transports millions of bus passengers.

"Mobility is more than just trains and buses. It is about enabling people to connect, to pursue their dreams, and to create a better future for themselves and their loved ones. Our turnaround is firmly on track, and I am confident that we have what it takes to ensure that rail becomes the backbone of the public transport system," concludes Emeran. ○