

Looters strip Apple Express

HOPES that Nelson Mandela Bay's iconic Apple Express steam train will grace South Africa's longest narrow gauge railway line again are at risk of being derailed as the former flagship tourist attraction is increasingly targeted by thieves and vandals.

This comes as the Eastern Cape Narrow Gauge Rail Development Initiative (ECNGRDI) raised hopes that its ambitious plans for the steam train – which stopped running in 2010 due to serious financial constraints – would resume operations on its traditional Humewood to Thornhill route in November.



Nerina Skuy, chairwoman of the Heritage Railway Association of Southern Africa (HRASA)

Citing inadequate security Nerina Skuy, chairwoman of the Heritage Railway Association of Southern Africa (HRASA) and spokeswoman for ECNGRDI, has raised the alarm over a string of thefts including that of historic fixtures on the train, and vandalism at Transnet premises and at Transnet's Humewood diesel depot where the locomotive is being stored.

Skuy's concerns closely follow reports last week that about R2-million worth of copper was stolen from the Forest Hill train depot over a period of a month.

"We've had a number of incidents over the last couple of years. In early 2010, we lost a truckload of locomotive spares and these cannot be replaced at any price. Last year, the Apple Express operations office was broken into twice and the theft from the coaches happened two months ago," Skuy said.

"To address this [lost locomotive parts] we are looking at other options and may even have to resort to using modern parts, which is a pity as these coaches are more than 100 years old.

"With regard to the loss from the office, we are hoping to find some funding or donations to replace these."

She said the owner of a nearby guesthouse had contacted her about three weeks ago to report noises at the depot.

"We later discovered that someone had tried to force the door to the sheds where our locomotives are kept. It has a solid door with cross pieces, which prevented them from gaining access – we have since secured that door at our own expense," she said. Skuy said when the offices were ransacked a complete computer, heavy duty power cables, tools and other items worth about R60000 had been stolen.

Pointing out that security levels at the depot were of great concern, Skuy explained that there were only two unarmed security staff on duty who worked 12-hour shifts.

"Access is being gained from the Walmer side of the depot through dense vegetation. Security would not even be aware the perpetrators were there.

"The diesel depot is poorly lit and the high mast lighting has parts missing and therefore has not been working since probably 2010. There are no lights at the entrances of buildings or offices. The depot is literally in semi-darkness and to date, the lights have not been repaired."

Transnet security manager John Elliot said his department was not responsible for the security at the depot and referred requests for comment to Transnet communication management.

However, in an earlier e-mail response to questions from Skuy, Elliot wrote: "... please be advised that the guards deployed at Humewood Diesel Depot are the guards of Transnet Rail Engineering which we oversee.

"This matter will be addressed with the Management concerning what transpired at the Diesel Depot. As the Apple Express is a private entity whenever their items are stolen they should report the matter to the SAPS.

"On the other hand Apple Express can also hire their own registered security company to protect their assets and whatever company they use for that company to perform work on Transnet property they should undergo a safety induction."

But according to Skuy, "The Apple Express train is actually the asset of Transnet Foundation [TF] – the corporate social investment arm of Transnet. It is in our custody for its safekeeping and operation. HRASA has a memorandum of understanding with TF and as such we are committed to do what is best for these assets in trying to ensure they are preserved and safe."

Transnet communications manager Leon Gerber could not be reached for comment yesterday.