

Major Facelift for Johannesburg

Plans in pipeline for high-rise blocks in posh neighbourhoods

One of the biggest urban-planning changes in the city of Joburg's history is looming, with spacious suburbs possibly having to make way for giant apartment and office blocks.

The plans, already preliminarily passed at a council meeting, will see:

- * Sections of the posh suburbs of Inanda, Sandhurst, Parkmore and Morningside turned into business districts;
- * The elimination of suburbs such as Melrose, Dunkeld and Atholl and their transformation into high-rise office and apartment blocks;
- * The erection of 20-storey, mixed-use office and residential blocks in Rosebank and Sandton;
- * The expansion of the Sandton CBD to include the suburb of Atholl;
- * The expansion of business nodes in most parts of northern Joburg;
- * Permission granted to developers to build high-rise buildings along Oxford and Rivonia roads; and
- * A significant increase in building density in areas such as Parktown North and Killarney.

The plans, tabled in three proposals before the Joburg council late last month, under the Urban Development Framework document, have been put in place to ensure the success of Gautrain and the city's R2-billion Bus Rapid Transport System.

The documents contain the council's vision for Sandton, Rosebank and Marlboro, all of which will have Gautrain stations. The plans, which were passed by the council, will now be subject to a public-participation process at a council sitting on July 26.

Property experts are describing the plans as "major" and "inevitable".

Developer and investor Patrick Flanagan said it would "alleviate traffic congestion, as mixed-used developments reduce residents' reliance on cars".

He added: " Before emotion comes into it, people who own properties in these areas should clearly understand what is proposed. "People must ... be very mature in understanding what this is in terms of overall town-planning."

But not everybody shares Flanagan's view. Rosebank ward councillor Ian Ollis accused the city of alerting developers to the plans before residents got to look at them. Some of his Dunkeld constituents, he claimed, had already received visits from developers on "shopping sprees" for property in the area. "Before we even knew about the plans, developers were already knocking on doors with offers to buy houses," he said.

On Wednesday, officials from the city's planning department met with councillors of affected areas to brief them on the process. The councillors called for intense involvement by residents.

The Urban Development Framework also calls for the business districts of Rosebank, Marlboro and Sandton to be extended to include Melrose, Dunkeld, Parkmore and parts of Illovo, Sandhurst and Alexandra.

Also on the cards are high-rise buildings near Gautrain stations, as well as a 10-storey average for buildings in Rosebank, with those close to the Gautrain station allowed to be higher.

The document recommended an even higher building density than did the five-year Integrated Development Plan mooted earlier this year, which sparked an uproar and will no longer be applied.

The Urban Development Framework document states that council plans to allow high-rise buildings up to a 15-minute walk away from Gautrain stations.

Property economist Francois Viruly said this would not necessarily cause a decrease in property prices in affected neighbourhoods.

Council spokesman Nthatsi Modingoane said: "I don't want to comment on the details of the current proposals because it might change after the public-participation process."