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Centurion – an Urban Future in the making.

A huge problem with cities in South Africa is that the urban form is being regarded as hugely economically inefficient over a wide front. Most of this inefficiency has been blamed on a political legacy from the past. However in Gauteng the urban development since 1994 has only entrenched previous spatial development trends both through institutional as well as market related development. According to many urban planners no spontaneous market driven movement towards a more sustainable, equitable and inclusive urban model of economic and spatial development in Gauteng Province can be reported to occur in future.

There is a fundamental connection between the economic aspects of urban spatial problems, the low levels of liveability in cities and the huge lack of sustainability of the Gauteng urban systems. As it is becoming a certain reality that the sustainability issue of our urban footprint is now paramount to be addressed by regulation it will soon become clear that spatial development planning by the 3 levels of government will have a huge impact on the market for property development. Huge and intensive development projects will soon be restricted to brown field redevelopment and urban infill development only. Newly approved national planning and development legislation will soon integrate institutional policies for spatial development planning and development like never before since 1994. Because of this the criteria used by many development investors to locate developments will have to be totally redefined.

One of the implications of the Gautrain system is that it can address aspects of the low intensity urban system on a gigantic scale. New growth can be concentrated around Gautrain stations in relation to the passenger capacity of this rail system. Because of the near full capacity of the road going movement systems in Gauteng and the increasing high cost of using it the Gautrain related urban system will markedly impact positively on build up areas within a relatively short time. Areas around Gautrain stations will soon become the prime properties in Gauteng. Such areas will soon have a decided advantage over properties elsewhere. There is some lag in this respect already causing too low intensity developments being constructed around some stations. This is the only mechanism to increase urban efficiency for new development on such a scale that localities around stations like - Sandton and Centurion - can move into the global economic market with ease. This will take the centrality and function of these urban nodes to new heights never experienced before – ideal for serving markets operating on the levels of Sub-Saharan African, southern hemisphere and global scale.

One of the major form giving elements of the Gauteng Urban Region is the 3 north south corridors running between The City of Tshwane metro area in the north of Gauteng to the Cities of Ekurhuleni and Johannesburg Metros in the south. These corridors are being formed by the R21 road in the east, the N1-21 road in the centre and the R55 road in the west. The 3 corridors come together in the north in Centurion relatively close to each other. Already a huge urban node of $\pm 100\,000\text{m}^2$ of retail floor area, $\pm 350\,000\text{m}^2$ of office space and more than a million

square meters of post-industrial quaternary activities, high tech industrial, distribution and warehousing activities has concentrated on this crossroads of the corridors. More than a million square meters of additional retail and office developments are being planned in the area for the short term. A data map compiled by the Gauteng City-region Observatory (which is a partnership of the University of Johannesburg, University of the Witwatersrand, and The Gauteng Provincial Government) shows that already this southern area of the of the City of Tshwane Metro has the highest concentration of firms per square kilometre in the whole of this Metro.

The original Centurion municipality came about in 1976 at a time when the residing population was more or less 40 000 people with practically no job opportunities within the area except for the Air force and ISCOR. The province forced the existing Lyttelton municipality to extend its area of jurisdiction to 300 square kilometres. At the time the area comprised of only low density residential neighbourhoods scattered throughout the area. The municipality realised it had to create a proper tax base. It therefore bought land and planned a good street access system from the existing freeways, a shopping centre of 35000m², a new car trading centre and office node surrounding a lake constructed in the Hennops River. The municipality supplied the services, build the lake and sold the land to various developers. Development began in earnest in the early nineteen eighties. The whole development snow balled and kept growing providing excellent agglomeration economies and boosted all sectors of the economy and residential components.

By the year 2000 the total population - in the original area of 300km² - was 137 000 people with an average growth rate of between 6% and 9,7% per annum. In 2000 the total lettable business floor area in the municipality was 1 314 700m² of which nearly 40% (±525 800m²) was in the central area surrounding the original development by the municipality. At the time about 38000 job opportunities existed in the municipality. The office growth rate from 1995 to 2000 was on average 14% per annum. Since 2000 the area south of the N1 freeway opened up for new office developments in a big way.

It was clear from the beginning that the Centurion urban node was situated on the crossroads of the northern Gauteng conurbation possessing enormous impetus for growth and change. The same situation is still applicable today. Local politicians and local planners alike are convinced that the Centurion Node could be the modern central business area of the Tshwane Metro – tapping into the global market sphere of the northern Gauteng area and leading the way regarding business relations with developing Africa. The Centurion business node is flexing its muscles to break out of the cocoon of being mostly part of the local economy only into the international arena. For this process there are magnificent opportunities for developers to present the market with the best facilities there could possibly be.

There are multiple economic spatial factors driving growth in the southern Tshwane area of Centurion. From the mid-eighties the most important growth factor was the spatial connection of post-industrial and knowledge based companies that settled in the urban fringe of the sprawled suburbs of the South East of Pretoria and Centurion and those in Sandton, Randburg and Roodepoort connected to each other by way of the N1 freeway. This was tremendously enhanced when Midrand came about.

A second important factor is the office line of development between Pretoria CBD and Johannesburg CBD along part of the N1 freeway and the M1 freeway into Johannesburg. The Gautrain enhanced this line of development on a huge scale by bringing the Sandton urban node into this trend. A third driving factor is the R21 link to the O.R. Tambo International Airport and among others the airtropolis at OR Tambo airport being developed by Gauteng Province as part of their Blue IQ projects. The final external driver of growth in future will be the upgrading of the existing railway system between Pretoria and Germiston. This rail system serves the whole of the Tshwane metro very well and just needs renewal and modernisation for it to function optimally. On the existing rail system around the Centurion Urban Node area there are 5 stations within a short distance from each other.

Although the developed Centurion Mall area came about because of private transport via the Gauteng freeway system it is very well positioned to benefit from the future advantages of the mass transport systems of Gautrain, the municipal bus rapid transport system and the upgrading of the existing railway line between Pretoria station and Germiston.

Developers of the Symbio City development in the Centurion Lake are planning to implement a personal rapid transit system to link all places within the area with each other. This will be the ideal system to integrate all the different movement systems that will be available in the area shortly.

The Southern Tshwane Metro area is on the verge to explode as one of Gauteng's most important nodes of new development. Some of the planned developments are so advanced that the area will surely attract the smart people of the economy dealing with the sub-continent, the southern hemisphere and the global economy. This in turn will attract more foreign investment and create an urban future that will bring long term prosperity to the Centurion area.