



Building a safe and integrated transport system

Limpopo MEC of Transport and Community Safety, Mavhungu Lerule-Ramakhanya, reflects on the role that aviation can play in creating an integrated system and promoting economic growth.



MEC Mavhungu Maureen Lerule-Ramakhanya, Department of Transport and Community Safety



BIOGRAPHY

Born in Makhado (formerly Louis Trichardt), Mavhungu was a community activist from a young age, heading various structures including the ANC Youth League before taking on leadership roles within the African National Congress at a provincial level. She is also a member of the South African Communist Party. She was appointed as Executive Mayor of Vhembe District Municipality before serving as Speaker of the Limpopo Provincial Legislature. In March 2020 she became the Member of Executive Council (MEC) for Transport and Community Safety.

What are the primary objectives of the Department of Transport and Community Safety and how does aviation fit in with them?

Our mandate is to provide safe, sustainable and affordable integrated transport services for the citizens of our province. To intensify the fight against crime and to root out corruption. This must be done in a way that promotes socio-economic development.

We have to provide for the safe transportation of goods, services and people. Road safety, mobility and vehicle safety and law enforcement on our roads are key. Aviation, and the Polokwane International Airport in particular, plays a vital role in positioning the province as a logistics hub.

Are you promoting freight transport?

In January we will be meeting with existing freight companies who have shown an interest in leasing space.

How will the activities at the airport assist in road safety?

Aviation fits in with the pillars of our strategy in terms of safety. When PIA is fully operational it will significantly reduce the load on our roads, especially at peak times like Easter and Christmas and make for a safer travel experience.

Polokwane International Airport was downgraded because of safety concerns. How far have you gone in addressing the challenges?

We have recently received our licence for operating for the year to come, so we passed the annual assessment.

How are things looking for the coming months?

Our department, together with the Limpopo Tourism Agency and the Limpopo Department of Economic Development, Environment and Tourism (LEDET), has agreed on a marketing strategy where we are targeting the holiday months to drive up numbers.

Are there any plans for another airline to operate out of PIA?

We are open to anyone. We are not in a position to offer monetary incentives, but we encourage any airline with a licence to come to Limpopo. The economic cluster at provincial level is working on a strategy on how best to introduce more cargo and freight businesses.

Would the introduction of additional routes to Cape Town and Durban assist the province's development?

We have a lot of people who go to Durban and Cape Town for holidays and business. If those routes were available, it would help a lot.

Commercial services resume at Polokwane International Airport

Hard work pays off and growth plans are in the works.



The resumption of services at the Polokwane International Airport (PIA) on 18th October 2021 came as relief to people who had been deprived of access to one of the most reliable modes of transport due to a downgrade.

Commercial activities were suspended pending the finalisation of severe safety findings by the South African Civil Aviation Authority (SACAA). It took the Gateway Airports Authority Limited (GAAL) about five months to fix the identified risks.

Among the dignitaries who came to witness the resumption of commercial activities were Limpopo Department of Transport and Community Safety MEC Mavhungu Lerule-Ramakhanya, Economic Development and Tourism MEC Thabo Mokone, Polokwane Municipality Executive Mayor John Mpe, Limpopo Tourism Agency CEO Moses Ngobeni, Airport Acting CEO Paul Moloto and the GAAL board led by the Chairperson, Victor Xaba. It was a colourful welcome and the mood was jovial as the first flight from OR Tambo International touched down. The strength and readiness of emergency personnel was displayed.

Passengers were warmly welcomed by a group of young people bearing huge banners. The first flight was a symbol of many more to follow after a commitment from Airlink.

MEC Lerule-Ramakhanya thanked everyone who contributed to the reopening of the facility. The MEC had earlier assembled a team to assist GAAL. She assured the people of Limpopo that the facility will never be downgraded again. The MEC also thanked the SACAA for their intervention in ensuring the safety of passengers.

"I want to take this time and thank everyone for the effort made to make sure that this airport is back to its glory days. We have a responsibility as a collective to ensure that we remain a shining example to South Africa and the world. I am grateful that we have a board led by people with aviation experience and I have no doubt that they will take this airport to greater heights and also to ensure that it remains economically viable," said Lerule-Ramakhanya.

Airport management is currently canvassing for new tenants and old businesses to return to cater for hundreds of passengers. There is currently one airline operating between Polokwane and OR Tambo, with two flights in the morning and two in the late afternoon, which is likely to increase in the course of 2022. The PIA management is working around the clock to attract other airline services and cargo carriers.

The airport is strategically placed to transit cargo to the SADC region and for the development of the Musina-Makhado Special Economic Zone (MMSEZ). ■

ABOUT GAAL

Gateway Airports Authority Limited is the entity responsible for the management of all public airports in the Limpopo province. GAAL is exploring opportunities to expand and make PIA competitive. PIA has a variety of business opportunities, including leasing of vacant office space, hangars and a fuel farm.

ONLINE RESOURCES

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Building a logistics hub at Polokwane International Airport

Victor Xaba, the chairperson of the board of Gateway Airports Authority Limited (GAAL), reports on growing investor and airline interest as the entity rebuilds.



**Dithoriso Victor Xaba,
Chairperson of the Board**

BIOGRAPHY

Born in Temba, Tshwane, Xaba is a business executive with over 21 years' work experience within the defence and aviation sectors. Qualified as a chemical engineer, Xaba joined Denel in 2000 and progressed through various technical and managerial positions eventually serving as Acting CEO, Chief Commercial Officer and Deputy CEO in Denel and SA Express. In October 2020, Xaba was appointed CEO of Forpress Technologies. In April 2021, Xaba was appointed Chairperson of the Board of GAAL.

What are the key responsibilities of the GAAL board?

As the accounting authority, the board is responsible for:

- Providing strategic direction, taking GAAL from its current position towards being financially and operationally sustainable.
- Entrenching the principles of corporate governance as well as compliance to industry regulations and legislative requirements.
- Leadership stability through the appointment of a senior management team that is adequately skilled, ethical, performance-driven and accountable.
- Ensuring business continuity.
- Driving the consolidation and growth of the aviation industry within Limpopo, furthering the interests of service delivery as well as economic growth in South Africa and the SADC region.
- Promoting the Provincial Integrated Transport Strategy, inclusive of the establishment of Polokwane as the Provincial Logistics Hub.

How important is safety in aviation?

The safety of passengers and goods in transit lies at the centre of the aviation industry. The aviation industry is governed by the South African Civil Aviation Authority Act.

Has PIA been attracting new investors or airlines?

Yes indeed. Within the current financial year there has been expressions of interest by companies wishing to take tenancy at the aerodrome as well as considering the expansion of their existing operations into PIA. This is a positive development which will fuel the activities of management to expand their engagement with airlines and infrastructure investors to consider PIA as a critical part of their growth plans.

What are the attractions of PIA as a transport hub?

The geographical location of PIA in proximity to SADC countries, the world-class facilities as well as the available usable land are some of the key attractions that make the airport "fertile ground" for the establishment of the provincial transport and logistics hub.

Is GAAL running campaigns to sell PIA to investors?

The resumption of scheduled flights into PIA, the renewal of the airport's operating licence by the SACAA and the relaxation of Covid-19 restrictions have allowed GAAL to prepare and launch campaigns targeted at air travellers, airlines and infrastructure investors. Beyond running GAAL-specific campaigns, the entity is engaging with the provincial administration stakeholders to embark on joint campaigns. ■

Finding the right talent

The Acting CEO of Gateway Airports Authority Limited (GAAL), Paul Moloto, looks forward to building a strong team to drive growth.



Paul Moloto, Acting CEO, GAAL

“ BIOGRAPHY

Born in Moletsí, Polokwane, Moloto became SRC President in 1991. A graduate of Damelin, University of Limpopo, Wits Business School and the National School of Government, he led various structures such as SAYCO, ANCYL, ANC, the SACP and NEHAWU. A former head of protocol in the Limpopo Office of the Premier, he became Director Special Programmes in the Department of Safety Security and Liaison until it was amalgamated into the Department of Transport and Community Safety.

Please tell us about your background in aviation.

My introduction to the aviation industry was by sheer luck. I was part of a group of volunteers helping the airport regain its commercial operations after the licence downgrade. My experience of being an extensive traveller assisted me in appreciating working in this intriguing environment.

What are your short-term goals for GAAL?

In the words of our Board Chairperson, “Arresting the decline”. For anything we do to be successful, we need to get the human resources right. Our task is finding the talent with the right ethics and commitment to ensure that we never regress.

Where do you see GAAL in 10 years’ time?

With the current limited utilisation of our asset, we remain a well-located logistics hub for the province, the largest and northern-most international airport with two long runways ready for cargo and passengers alike. Giving true meaning to the concept of the heartland of Southern Africa, safely providing a mode of transport still to be tapped into by the growing African continent.

Polokwane International Airport could assist as a refuelling station and cargo hub as well as serving to decongest passenger and cargo volumes for OR Tambo International Airport. Given the proximity to Gauteng, size and availability of space in Polokwane, the airport could also serve as a source for carbon-free hydrogen fuel. Polokwane International Airport will facilitate connecting flights for SAA, particularly to SADC countries.

What impact did Covid-19 have on operations?

We lost talent due to the death of some staff members. The lockdown has also led to the loss of business and revenue for the company.

Have flight figures improved after the lockdown?

There was an improvement after the lockdown, hence the resuscitation of full operations to Category Seven. We are optimistic that the business will flourish given that many of our potential passengers have been vaccinated and the economy of the country has stabilised.

What airlines fly in and out of GAAL?

Currently Airlink is our only commercial airline operator. There is an abundance of new opportunity available, based on the investment in infrastructure that has taken place. ■