

Engineering heavyweight celebrates 25 years in Maritzburg

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Rob McNeill, corporate consultant and principal geotechnical civil engineer, left and Angus Bracken, partner and principal engineering geologist



STARTING small as a 'one-man show/ in 1993, the Pietermaritzburg office of engineers and scientists SRK Consulting has served its region and beyond with projects as diverse as drought relief, water reticulation, stormwater infrastructure, tailings dams, waste management and cemetery planning and developments.

Rob McNeill – now a corporate consultant and principal geotechnical civil engineering technologist at SRK – first manned the office to get the ball rolling in 1993, after Durban-based SRK director Mike Slabbert pushed to have a presence in the KwaZulu-Natal capital.

“Although Durban was the commercial hub, it was important to have a presence in Pietermaritzburg, as its status as capital meant that many organisations – who were clients or potential clients – had their regional headquarters there,” said McNeill.

With a decade of railway engineering experience in Zimbabwe, his time with SRK had been spent in Rustenburg and Welkom – working mainly on tailings dam design for mines as well as municipality work in fields like stormwater and road infrastructure.

“We already had some contacts in the Pietermaritzburg area, and began with designing road upgrades, water supply and stormwater systems for municipalities – as well as a project for Umgeni Water that included river boardwalks and a temporary dam at the agricultural showgrounds.”

In 1994 SRK was awarded a large contract related to a drought relief operation. A regional council, together with a water board, required substantial geohydrological work including the drilling of boreholes in a number of areas.

“SRK’s profile rose on the strength of our work on contracts like these, and we were soon involved in large water reticulation projects – for instance, extending the formal water supply system into rural areas around Pietermaritzburg,” he said.

“One of our most memorable achievements was a labour-intensive pipeline project – long before the Expanded Public Works Programmes. About 90% of a 350 km pipeline was

installed by hand – enabling as much project expenditure as possible to be pushed towards the communities where the services were being delivered.”

Demand for the company’s skills were at a premium and Umgeni Water seconded McNeill as project manager for 18 months to augment the design work with hands-on construction.

The vagaries of weather swung from drought to floods, and a storm on Christmas Day in 1995 heralded a surge of work in another direction for SRK. McNeill had been talking for some time to municipalities about its capacity for stormwater solutions – and this now occupied the office’s focus for years to come.

One of the largest projects was to map the entire stormwater system of the suburb of Edendale, following the demarcation process that incorporated Edendale into the Msunduzi Municipality.

Another opportunity came with the implementation of the new Integrated Waste Management Planning System, and the office garnered considerable work in preparing Integrated Waste Management Plans and identifying new landfill sites around the province.