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Our ref. WD SPIES

16 February 2026

The Honourable Gayton McKenzie
Minister of Sport, Arts and Culture
Private Bag X899
Pretoria
0001

By e-mail

Dear Minister McKenzie,

**OBJECTION IN TERMS OF SECTION 10(3) OF THE SOUTH AFRICAN
GEOGRAPHICAL NAMES COUNCIL ACT, 1998 (ACT NO. 118 OF 1998) TO THE
RENAMING OF GRAAFF-REINET TO ROBERT SOBUKWE**

We act on behalf of AfriForum, a civil rights organisation dedicated to the protection of minority rights, cultural heritage, and the promotion of community interests in South Africa.

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1. We refer to the Government Gazette Notice No. 54101 dated 6 February 2026, in which you approved the renaming of the town of Graaff-Reinet to Robert Sobukwe, following recommendations from the South African Geographical Names Council (SAGNC).
2. Pursuant to Section 10(3) of the South African Geographical Names Council Act, 1998 (Act No. 118 of 1998), which provides that *"any person or body dissatisfied with a geographical name approved by the Minister may, within one month of such approval, lodge a complaint in writing to the Minister,"* our client hereby formally objects to this name change.
3. Section 10(1) empowers the Minister to approve or reject a recommended geographical name, while Section 10(2) requires publication in the Government Gazette.
4. Section 10(4) allows the Minister to refer complaints to the Council for advice, and Section 10(5) permits amendment or withdrawal of the approval after considering the complaint.
5. Our client hereby requests that you exercise your discretion under Section 10(5) to withdraw this approval, as the decision –
 - a. fails to align with legal and policy requirements;
 - b. disregards overwhelming public opposition; and
 - c. is already causing polarisation among communities in the town, instead of contributing to social cohesion.
6. The renaming decision is not in line with the *Eastern Cape Provincial Policy on Naming and Renaming of Geographical Features*. This policy emphasizes the standardization of geographical names to ensure unequivocal identification, preserve cultural heritage, and sanction toponyms for official purposes.

7. Critically, the policy also stipulates that renaming of features, particularly those with historical significance, should only occur under exceptional circumstances. No such exceptional circumstances exist here.
8. The policy requires good reasons for renaming human-made features, such as non-compliance with SAGNC policies, undermining local values, or offensiveness to a cultural group.
9. The name "Graaff-Reinet" – established in 1786 and reflecting the town's deep historical roots – does not meet these criteria. Instead, the change appears to disregard the policy's guiding principles of transformation through transparency, compliance with relevant legislation, and preservation of historical and cultural heritage.
10. The policy further prioritizes restoring names with historical and local significance and avoiding changes that could cause confusion or erase established identities.
11. Moreover, the decision ignores substantial public opposition and fails to reflect the will of the community. A 2024 quantitative study by Stellenbosch University Professor Ronnie Donaldson found that 83.6% of Graaff-Reinet residents opposed the name change, cutting across racial lines and highlighting a unified resistance rather than division.
12. This opposition is echoed in widespread public responses. Even members of the Sobukwe family have expressed hurt over the backlash, acknowledging youth opposition and the town's entrenched identity.
13. The change was motivated as representing more inclusivity and fuelling social cohesion in the town, but since the announcement became known, the opposite has happened. Different communities are now asking if the original name is changed, why aren't other natives of the town such as Rupert, Hufkie and Great Trek leaders or even Gideon Scheepers named instead. "Irafhu", the Xhosa

alternative to Graaff-Reinet is also mentioned. Instead of honouring Sobukwe, his contribution to the town's welfare is even questioned. Before, this division was unprecedented. The process creates controversy and ignoring the public consultation processes' findings discredits public participation options and fuels apathy among residents

14. Our client submits that proceeding with the renaming contravenes the policy's requirements for stakeholder consultation and evidence of support and undermines the Act's objectives of standardization and transformation through inclusive processes.
15. The change risks erasing a 240-year-old heritage without demonstrated need or benefit, contrary to the policy's emphasis on promoting identity and relation to the landscape.
16. We urge you to refer this objection to the SAGNC for reconsideration under Section 10(4) and ultimately withdraw the approval under Section 10(5). Should this not occur, our client reserves the right to pursue further legal remedies, including review proceedings.
17. Please acknowledge receipt of this objection and advise on the steps you intend to take, your ultimate decision as well as the reasons therefore.
18. Our client's rights remain reserved.

Yours faithfully,



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