



CHUFFED CHUF. . . The Apple Express tourism train was re-launched by the department of roads and transport in Loerie on Friday. It will be operating at weekends.
Pictures: BRIAN WITBOOI

Apple Express on track once again

■ Relaunch of historic train marks unveiling of long-awaited 10-year rail plan for Eastern Province

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EASTERN Cape Roads and Transport MEC Gloria Barry unveiled the long-awaited 10-Year Rail Plan at the weekend by relaunching Nelson Mandela Bay's historical Apple Express.

The department's shift back to rail is set to create nearly 800 jobs and develop about 87 small businesses along the route from Madiba Bay to Langkloof.

At the official launch of the 10-Year Rail Plan in Loerie on Friday, Barry said the increase in road traffic and congestion from freight, public transport and private vehicles had made it necessary for the government to consider rail as a safe, reliable means of transport.

"The situation necessitates the government and its social partners considering rail as an option in order to



RAIL RELAUNCH. . . Roads and Transport MEC Gloria Barry launched the Apple Express tourism train in Loerie on Friday. Robbie Dennis, the mayor of Kouga, also attended the launch.

save the declining road infrastructure . . . through providing a safe, reliable and affordable service," the MEC said.

"Despite its outlook, the

Apple Express can still contribute in today's technology-driven world . . . to benefit both urban and rural communities along its route."

She said the department would spend R1,4-million to support the operations of the Apple Express.

The hope is that the Apple Express will boost tourism in the province, particularly during the 2010 Soccer World Cup, to enable visitors to access accommodation outside the Nelson Mandela metropolitan area.

A number of other railway operations have already been developed in the province, although Barry admits there is still room for improvement.

"Only 23 per cent of infrastructure is good, including the Port Elizabeth to Noupoort and East London to Bethulie rail infrastructure."

She said only 18% of infrastructure was being used with the Blaney to Cookhouse and Amabhele to Mthatha operations.

And a mere 22% of railway infrastructure had been developed in the routes from Addo to Kirkwood, Alicedale to Grahamstown, Port Elizabeth to Avontuur and Port Elizabeth to Willowmore.

"We intend to revive our rail network, which consists of about 3 800km and 450 stations, which are underused," Barry said.

Over the next 10 years, the roads and transport department will redevelop existing train stations, which will create employment opportunities and also promote tourism, and R13-million has already been earmarked to spend on manufacturing new high-speed coaches.

The department is also considering new rail connections between Tarkastad and Cradock, to serve Indwe to Coega and Nelson Mandela Bay and Buffalo City.

"Rail tours will improve access to existing and potential tourist attractions and increase tourist volumes, which will have a positive impact on revenue," Barry said.

"Seasonal workers on commercial fruit farms could be engaged in tourism businesses outside of the harvest period as part of the intended programme to improve their standard of living," she said.