

2012 TOUR DE FREE STATE STARTS IN VIRGINIA



Maryna van Wyk

It is winter in the Free State but the people of the province are warm inside.

With these words, premier of the Free State, Ace Magashule, welcomed the 124 women cyclists from 19 countries who will be competing in the Tour de Free State until Sunday.

Magashule, MECs of the province, local government officials of the Matjhabeng municipality and the SA Cyclist fraternity attended the gala event at the Tikwe Lodge in Virginia on Tuesday night.

The MEC of the department of economic development, tourism and environmental affairs, Mamiki Qabathe, announced on Tuesday the government's plan to boost cycling as a sport in the province by donating 50 bicycles to 10 primary schools in Virginia.

"This is a start for the children to be a part of teams such as these, in the future. We cannot just have a race, we must invest in the communities residing here," she said.

Qabathe said Virginia was chosen as the starting point of the Tour de Free State this year because of the town's important tourist attractions. A kraal of King Moshoeshoe is situated outside Virginia on the road to Ventersburg and mammoth fossils, believed to be 4 million years old were on the banks of the Sand River near Meloding.

"Merriespruit was destroyed by a mudslide and has been rehabilitated. The community, black and white, came together to rebuild the area. This is ubuntu," she said.

Qabathe encouraged communities in the Free State to visit tourist attractions in the province. The cyclists will be in Jagersfontein today. The town's hole is larger than Kimberley's Big Hole. "We must travel in our province and send the Free State to everybody," she said.

Shortly before the first stage of the tour, Qabathe handed 50 bicycles to the Tikwe, Harmony, Boaze Saaiplaas, Ditsebeng and Diketseng primary schools. Each school received 10 bicycles.

Saaiplaas headmaster Anthonie de Beer said he had chosen a group of pupils who were not involved in other sports to help with cycling as a sporting activity. "The children are very excited. I will give them some pointers along the way and organise competitions", he said.

The organiser of the Tour de Free State, Bobby Hartsliet, said there would be a competition at Phaklisa for all the schools who received bicycles this week.

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