

# AbaQulusi Plaza redevelopment complete

AbaQulusi Plaza, formerly Vryheid Plaza, has reopened its doors after an 18-month redevelopment programme.



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At the ribbon-cutting ceremony in November, Cllr Khehla Mkhwanazi, the Mayor of the AbaQulusi Local Municipality commented that the shopping centre was an essential boost to the economy of Vryheid, citing the 100 jobs that Shoprite alone had created, as well as the employment opportunities the construction had provided.

Vryheid is the main service and retail hub for the AbaQulusi Municipality. As such, AbaQulusi Plaza, which is a convenience centre aimed at commuters, forms an integral part of the Northern KZN transport network, with long and short-distance taxis operating from the centre and a strong bus network to surrounding areas. The shopping centre is the last retail opportunity for homebound commuters.

## **Convenience centre aimed at commuters**

The most significant aspect of the redevelopment was the expansion of the intermodal transport facility. The original taxi rank was relocated to the land adjacent to the centre, with the support of the AbaQulusi Municipality, taxi associations, and bus service providers. It can now accommodate over 300 taxis and close to 100 buses per day.

It includes furnished offices for the Taxi Association with Wi-Fi access, a boardroom that can seat up to 100 people and shower facilities for taxi and bus drivers. The costs to run these facilities will be covered by Fortress Retail, which demonstrates the landlord's commitment to working together to support the community.

A new bridge seamlessly connects the parking area, bus ranks, and taxi holding areas to the centre, ensuring safe and convenient access for all shoppers. Fortress Retail has committed to maintaining the taxi and bus rank area on an ongoing basis to ensure that shoppers will continue to enjoy the facilities for years to come.



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AbaQulusi Plaza is proud to welcome informal traders who previously operated outside the centre as official tenants. These plaza traders will now have kiosks to showcase their products and services in an inviting retail setting, with access to clean, secure indoor facilities.

“This ambitious project is not just a revamp of a shopping centre. It embodies a beacon of hope for the community, thanks to the partnerships we have developed with the local municipality, taxi associations, and bus service providers. The inclusion of informal traders as tenants in the centre demonstrates our commitment to the local economy and our understanding of the needs of shoppers who frequent the centre,” said Steven Brown, CEO of Fortress Real Estate.

An expansion of Vryheid Plaza was on the cards for many years and was strongly supported by national retailers. This demand was driven by both existing tenants, who want larger shops, and new tenants, who wanted to trade in the centre. The Caltex garage, Cashbuild store and Boxer store were the only stores that were not demolished in the redevelopment process.

AbaQulusi Plaza now has a retail GLA of 15,329m<sup>2</sup> (an increase of 8,370m<sup>2</sup> when compared with the previous centre layout). The total GLA of the expanded centre is 16,900m<sup>2</sup> (including Cashbuild and Caltex) with an estimated 50 shops in total.

### **Formal and informal retail sectors combined**

This project demonstrates the effectiveness of the formal and informal retail sectors coming together to operate alongside one another. The landlord has embraced informal traders as tenants and has invested in kiosks to allow them to trade in optimal conditions. The centre has been purpose built to provide backup power and backup water on site and offers free wifi to all its customers.

The roads surrounding the centre were upgraded: a new traffic circle and slipway was installed, and a dedicated motorised parking area was built. From an environmental point of view, the council stormwater drainage system around the centre was rehabilitated and the river that runs through the property was cleaned, upgraded, and secured. There is a full waste management plan in place, including recycling of waste generated at the centre.

Bulk earthworks started in June 2022, and the redevelopment was completed by October 2023 for store fit-outs.

“We believe in the retail possibilities within the province, and we anticipate serving communities up to 60km away. The redevelopment of AbaQulusi Plaza is aligned with our strategy of expanding and enhancing our best retail assets. Many jobs have been created and community facilities have been upgraded, which we hope will revitalise the local economy,” Brown concluded.

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