



Merafong Local Municipality
Cllr. Carl Steenekamp

South Africa's youngest councillor believes in the power of active citizenship



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On Monday, June 12, 2023, **Cllr. Carl Steenekamp** had a busy morning. In order to discuss how to resolve a power outage in her ward, he met with a local councillor to begin his already hectic day at Merafong City Local Municipality.

Servanthood

Cllr. Steenekamp (22), who was elected as South Africa's youngest councillor in the municipal elections of 2021 at the age of 20, was driven by a strong desire to see his local council filled with people who care about their communities. This value is one that he not only brought with him into council but also uses to guide his day-to-day activities as a councillor.

"I became involved with my political party, the DA, even before I was eligible to vote because I was motivated to address the deterioration I witnessed in my municipality, Merafong. I recognised the immense potential of the area and desired to bring about positive change in the lives of community members," he said.

"Therefore, I actively engaged myself in various initiatives, such as organising clean-up campaigns, with the intention of encouraging others to join and contribute to the solution. I

firmly believe in the power of active citizenship and realised that the most effective way to persuade others was by leading by example and actively participating myself," said **Cllr. Steenekamp**.

Youth participation in local government

Following the municipal elections in 2021, 2969 of the 9473 elected councillors—**Cllr. Steenekamp** being the youngest—were between the ages of 20 and 39. Involving young people in municipal decision-making processes is essential to fostering an inclusive society where everyone's voice is heard because young people (18-34 years) make up nearly a third of South Africa's population.

"Ageist stereotypes that undermine the interest of young people in public affairs, and the view that young people are not interested in public affairs are misguided and fail to recognise our passion and commitment. Many young people are disillusioned, but that does not mean we are not interested," said **Cllr. Steenekamp**

He is adamant that everyone, including young people, has skills, knowledge, and experiences

that can equally contribute to the entire municipal decision-making process.

“By actively involving young people, we can foster positive change within communities and enhance the political landscape as a whole. Embracing youth in politics enriches the decision-making process, encourages innovative thinking, and ensures that the voices of all generations are heard and valued,” said **Cllr. Steenekamp**.

Leadership

In addition to his role as a Merafong Local Municipality council member, **Cllr. Steenekamp** was given responsibility over the operations of his political party, the Democratic Alliance (DA). **Cllr. Steenekamp** was appointed to represent his political party in council as the Chief Whip in December 2022.

“Managing colleagues who are older than me in my senior position requires a foundation of mutual respect. Ultimately, establishing a culture of mutual respect and understanding allows us to work together effectively, regardless of age differences,” he said.

Technology as a tool for civic engagement

Cllr. Steenekamp is an advocate for bridging the gap between citizens and their municipalities using technology, including social media. He said that this allows for more widespread public engagement, especially on issues that affect communities.

“Utilising various digital tools, I have established regular communication channels to keep my ward informed about council activities and the initiatives I am undertaking to enhance our community. This has not only improved transparency but also encouraged active participation from residents,” he said.

Cllr. Steenekamp gave an example of how he used technology to encourage civic engagement among local residents.

“I am particularly proud of mobilising and involving many residents in efforts to protect local infrastructure and minimise power outages through a ward maintenance initiative. By harnessing the power of digital platforms, we have fostered a sense of unity and empowered the community to take ownership of our shared resources. It is gratifying to witness the positive impact we have achieved together.”

Work-life balance is essential.

For **Cllr. Steenekamp**, finding a balance between the demands of his career and his personal life requires that he intentionally manage his time between work and other aspects of his life.

“Some of my favourite hobbies that I enjoy doing during my personal time include hiking, rowing, jogging, reading, and spending time with close friends. I do like spending time enjoying those hobbies in nature as well – for tranquillity and clearing out my mind,” he said.

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