

## **OVERVIEW OF FLORIDA**

Florida largely shares its origin with the birth of Roodepoort in general, with the township first taking shape in about 1888 after prospecting for gold had begun in the area in 1884 and public diggings declared in 1886. The surveyor who originally surveyed the township of Roodepoort, William Pritchard, was so impressed by the profusion of flowers in one particular valley that he decided to name it Florida, Spanish for flowers. It was predominantly a dormitory town housing white employees of the mines, mainly the shift bosses and so forth, while the actual miners, workers, Africans and coloureds tended to live in surrounding areas such as Roodepoort and Maraisburg. Later on in Florida's history it also became a main housing centre for railway employees, confirming its dormitory town origins and character. It was therefore an exclusively white area under apartheid. There was virtually no community mobilisation around apartheid, with Florida's residents being on the beneficial side of the status quo. However, the most significant racial change post-1994 was the entry of coloureds into Florida, with residents indicating that currently around 40 to 50% of Florida's population is coloured. Interestingly, Florida did not experience any kind of influx of Africans and nor does there exist a particularly sizeable African population today; respondents generally estimated a figure of about 10%, which is interesting in comparison to the 2001 census data that puts the figure of Africans living in Florida just under half the number of whites.

Reactions to these racial changes cannot be described as contentious. Whites that did not subscribe to these changes and could afford to move out of Florida moved out, while relations within Florida between the different racial groups have always been calm. Some residents believed this could be explained by the relatively slow entry of coloureds into the area rather than a sudden influx. Although the main racial change was the entry of coloureds into Florida, the English-speaking high school, Florida Park High, experienced a large influx

of African students, who were bussed in from surrounding townships because of the perceived better quality of education received at former Model-C schools like Florida Park High. Most of the white parents pulled their children out of the school, partly in reaction to the racial change but also in response to the perceived decline in quality of government schools. Interestingly, the school has managed to maintain a 96% matric pass rate. In the community in general, there does not appear to be a high level of socialising between different racial groups, although public areas such as shops and the Florida central business district (CBD) are highly mixed spaces. The daily activities of residents of various racial groups tend to be relatively integrated. There are no particular areas where one racial group does its shopping, religious participation is largely integrated and clustering of racial groups is relatively mixed. Nonetheless, despite the mixed residential character of Florida, some areas of racial predominance can still be pointed out. For example, above the main street, Goldman Street, it is predominantly white even though many coloureds have moved in. This can perhaps be explained by the fact that this area was historically and traditionally white (as former mine houses) with an ageing population that is more or less settled there. In this case, lower rates of residential turnover have resulted in limited racial change. Furthermore, the area below the railway line is more of a working class area and mostly coloured, perhaps due to the historical link between race and class in South Africa. Thus, racially, Florida is very mixed (although certain racial trends are still apparent) and relations between groups range from calm to benevolent.

In considering economic development in Florida, the most significant change pointed out by residents was the decline of the Florida CBD. Many attributed this to the building of Westgate Mall, which centralised the major shops away from locations such as that of the Florida CBD. The CBD now houses mainly shops selling cheaper goods and so forth instead of so-called 'A-rate' tenants such as major chain stores.

Florida was traditionally a middle to lower-middle class area; it now appears to have areas that are middle class (above Goldman Street), lower-middle class (below Goldman Street) and working class (below the railway line). Unemployment is not a particularly salient issue in Florida, although as in general with the present world economic woes, it is on the up.

The main types of housing in Florida consist of free-standing houses as well as flats. The flats are primarily located below the railway line and the houses above it. There are no issues with informal housing, squatters or overcrowded houses. The level of homeownership in Florida is relatively high, with residents not aware of any particular change in these levels. The price of homes in Florida about a decade ago was lower in comparison to other areas making it a nice area with affordable housing. This is a likely reason that so many upwardly mobile coloureds moved into Florida after the end of apartheid. However, housing prices have increased drastically over the last decade, lowering only with the current economic crunch. There is not a high residential turnover rate in Florida, but those residents that move out tend to be those that are upwardly mobile and hence are moving further north into Johannesburg's wealthier northern suburbs. There have been no noticeable conflicts between residents and other interested parties such as developers, other than a relatively small issue between the some residents and the councillor who wanted to commercialise the Florida Lake area to a certain degree in an attempt to renew the area.

There appears to be a general decline in services and infrastructure, congruent with broader trends across South Africa. Respondents rated basic services like electricity, water, trash collection and so forth as satisfactory, but there is a sense of a decline in services like healthcare, the library, transport and so forth. For example, Discovery Hospital used to be a major hospital that was widely used by surrounding neighbourhoods, but it has degenerated to the extent that it has been downgraded to a clinic. With regard to policing, respondents indicated that they were satisfied with the service they had received whenever they had

needed the police, but still expressed the notion that general quality of policing not only in Florida but South Africa in general, had declined due to lack of resources, morale, professionalism and so forth. Schools, such as Florida Park High, faced a lot of pressure with influx of children from the townships, yet Florida Park High has managed to maintain a high standard of education. It has 1,400 pupils yet the school was only built for 1,100. However, classes are not overcrowded as the school employs teachers that it pays itself rather than from government funds in order to cope with the greater number of students. The state of recreational facilities has taken a severe dive. For example, the tennis courts and bowls club above Goldman Street on Park Lane are abandoned and out of use, as is the tennis club at Florida Lake. The public swimming pool was out of use and other surrounding recreational buildings in less than optimum condition. Furthermore, the Florida Lake area used to be a hub of activity and socialising, but it is no longer a favourable area to visit as residents indicated that it is now a hang-out for drunks and vagrants, and for fear of being mugged and so forth. The decline in recreational facilities has therefore negatively affected possibilities for interracial socialisation in the community.

Relations with government in Florida seem to be largely limited to paying rates and taxes and perhaps attending a community policing forum (CPF) meeting. Participation by residents in shaping local policies and services is severely limited, which seems due mainly to disinterest on the part of residents. For example, the councillor of Florida experiences frustration with low attendance at ward meetings and the residents association he attempted to establish was not a success due to complete lack of interest and support by residents. This is attributed by residents to the fact that Florida is a normal middle class area that still has good delivery of electricity, water, trash collection and so forth. It does not experience the same issues that poorer areas do; residents have not had to take much action to receive services in the first place. For Florida residents there seems very little to get organised about.

As one resident commented, “Florida is a very ordinary middle of the road place, there are no extreme issues around here”. This somewhat nonchalant attitude on behalf of residents also extends to politics, with a distinct lack of political fervour in Florida. There are thus no community organisations (apart from the CPF) or social movements in Florida.

Over the last decade the main political party in Florida has been the Democratic Alliance (DA), albeit with a small African National Congress (ANC) presence in the area. There does not necessarily appear to be dissatisfaction with the councillor, who is viewed by some as proactive and energetic. Many residents were not aware of the working of the ward process in terms of ward committee selection, allocation of funds and so forth, seemingly indicative of the largely disengaged political stance of the community.

### **Photos of Florida**



Florida CBD



Flats



Florida Lake



House south of Goldman



Kruger Park



Old Town Hall



Public pool building





Railway line and flats



Railway Station



Typical house north of Goldman



Van der Hoven tennis courts