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Outrage over sculptures

By Hugo Hagen

PUBLIC outrage poured in yesterday about the vandalism of the Leap-impala sculpture in Johannesburg's Oppenheimer Gardens, which could cost several hundred thousand rands to restore.

The sculpture was virtually demolished over the weekend by vandals who were presumably trying to sell the sawn-off parts to scrap metal dealers.

The Greater Johannesburg Metropolitan Council pledged yesterday it would restore the sculpture.

"We believe that the monument has historical

value to residents of the city, and we will restore it to its original specifications," spokesman Mr Jameel Chand told The Citizen.

He said a case of vandalism had been opened with the police and an internal investigation had been launched to establish why a security firm that was supposed to police the area around the clock had not detected or prevented the vandalism.

No arrests had been made by last night, but police spokesman Superintendent Chris Wilken said scrap metal dealers could expect tough action should they be caught with

the sawn-off heads and legs of the impala that formed the sculpture.

The work was executed by the internationally acclaimed sculptor, Herman Wald, who was commissioned by mining magnate Mr Harry Oppenheimer in 1960 to create a work "for the enjoyment of the public".

Wald's widow, Vera, said her husband went to great lengths to create impala that were "exactly right".

"He studied them in game reserves and at the zoo, making hundreds of sketches and many clay

TO PAGE 2

Outrage over vandalism

FROM PAGE 1

models.”

Yesterday Wald's son, Kempton Park sculptor Mike Wald, stepped forward to say he was willing to repair the damage.

He said he would consider it “a work of love” to restore his father's work.

“It is a big travesty that people could sink so low. The sculpture is hollow and fairly thin in places. Whoever did it would not get much for such a small amount of bronze.

“The restoration remains an enormous lot of work. The sawn-off heads and legs of the impala

would have to be copied or remoulded and then cast professionally before being braised on to the remaining sculpture.”

Mr Chand was overjoyed on being put in touch with Wald Jnr and suggested that the restoration project become a joint campaign between the Wald family, the council and The Citizen.

Mr Chand said the council had recently approved Mr Oppenheimer's request to move the sculpture to a new site at 45 Main Street, next to Anglo American's head office.

Mr Oppenheimer's

spokesman, Mr Clifford Elphick, was ecstatic that the sculpture would be restored. He said Anglo American wanted to create a pedestrian mall and green precinct around the head office where the sculpture would be situated.

“We would then be able to maintain and take care of the sculpture in a safe environment.”

Among those who called The Citizen yesterday to express outrage at the vandalism was the national organiser of the SA Union of Journalists, Mr Lethage Mochadi-bane.

He said the sculpture had been one of Johannesburg's most important landmarks. What had happened to it was “despicable”, although it was inevitable in a situation where the park had been taken over by hawkers to store their goods.

“One wonders if this is the price of freedom we fought for. Perhaps now other people will begin to see a reason for protecting our landmarks,” he said.

Mr Oppenheimer is offering a reward for the return of, or information leading to the return of the parts of the impalas.