

'Stop picking on us'

WITNESS 22/10/2020

Northdale uproar over wave of electricity disconnections

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Northdale residents have cried foul following another wave of electricity disconnections, and even appeals to their ward councillors have had no effect.

Those who were disconnected accused Msunduzi of being unfair in the way it carries out the disconnections, which includes targeting the northern area as well as cutting off people who have apparently paid.

I was disconnected for the debt we accumulated during lockdown because I couldn't work and my wife doesn't make enough to pay all the bills, but my point is, there are many of us who are in this position and we can't afford the 50% down payment that they want on the arrear debt.

Some also made calls for the City to set the disconnections team on to those who are illegally connected and stealing electricity instead of "innocent" ratepayers.

"I was disconnected for the debt we accumulated during lockdown because I couldn't work and my wife doesn't make enough to pay all the bills, but my point is, there are many of us who are in this position and we can't afford the 50% down payment that they want on the arrear debt," said Steven Naidoo.

He said the municipality should not have increased the down payment from 10% to 50% at a time when most people are still battling with the impact of Covid-19 on their finances.

"I know the municipality is broke

and they need money but we are paying our current account and we can afford to put about R500 to the arrear debt every month, but we don't have the over R9 000 that they want upfront so I guess they'll keep on disconnecting us until my business picks up and I can pay that amount," he said.

Ward 31 councillor Rooksana Ahmed concurred with him on the 50% down-payment on arrear debt. She said this was recently introduced when the City amended its credit control and debt collection policy which also states that ratepayers must settle their arrears within three months.

"Most people cannot afford the 50% down payment so they must be allowed to make written submissions to the CFO (chief financial officer) and the municipal manager with attachment of the proof of their household income for a different payment arrangement that gives them more time

to settle their debt because you must remember that they also have to service the current account."

Ahmed said the City's billing fiasco had turned councillors into ward-based officials. She said she was at the A.S. Chetty Building three of four times every week trying to sort out customer queries.

"People go there countless times — and I'm talking about the elderly and sick people — they don't get assistance, some come back even more confused so they end up coming to us for help. "Sometimes it's something as simple as a faulty meter that the finance department had not recorded."

Another Northdale resident said his bill was more than R1 800 higher this month even though there were still the same number of people in the house. He said he had already reported this to Msunduzi when he was disconnected this weekend. "I thought they wouldn't

disconnect since I had a query but the contractors told me there was nothing they could do."

He said it angered him that the City was investing so much resources cutting off people who were paying but nothing was being done to deal with the rampant theft of water and electricity across Msunduzi.

There were also allegations that the ANC-led Msunduzi was targeting DA-run wards but ANC councillor, Sunny Naidoo, said they also had dozens of properties cut off in Ward 30 over the weekend.

He said the disconnections resulted in a lot of frustrations because of the allegations that some were illegal. "Some people have paid but they were still disconnected ... We need to come up with a solution because we can't carry on inconveniencing people who are paying," said Naidoo.

He was hopeful that the revenue en-

hancement support that Development Bank of Southern Africa (DBSA) has agreed to give Msunduzi could finally bring the relief that the ratepayers have been seeking for years.

Yesterday *The Witness* reported that the bank would help the City with customer data cleansing, the auditing of meters, tariffs review as well as the restructuring along with the development of best practice procedure and staffing requirements regarding customer care.

The aim is to address Msunduzi's billing and customer service issues which is hoped to improve the revenue collection for the cash-strapped municipality.

City spokesperson Thobeka Mafumbatha said Msunduzi started with the disconnections on October 3. "We go area by area and end up in the northern. No one is targeted."

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Soft target for disconnectors

WITNESS 30/10/2020

I have previously defended the contracted electricity disconnectors in their woes regarding non-payment by Msunduzi Municipality over many months, stretching back to the 2017 to 2018 Christmas season.

But now, in the wake of the front-page story of Nela Oumar (*The Witness*, October 26), I feel compelled to take them on. Contract disconnectors get paid per disconnection and re-connection, but should be for site calls (where no action took place due to various reasons such as locked premises).

They have to be strict and unswayed by consumer protests in order to generate an income. (Unless a valid recent payment or arrangement is produced.)

But Oumar's situation beggars belief at how far any disconnector would go to achieve this.

There is a line to draw between doing one's job and just simply being unscrupulous. And clearly, in Oumar's case, she is the softest of soft targets, a money-spinner for the disconnectors (and municipality) month after month.

Disconnectors must realise that they

are not just that, but the tool of the municipality, its eyes and ears, and they must record every discrepancy, such as wrong or duplicated meter or account numbers, tampering, etc., and bring these to the attention of the municipal official in charge for further investigation. Was this done?

There is clear evidence that they were made aware of the wrongful disconnections, having gone there month after month for more than a year.

I sympathise with disconnectors, having been one for 10 years, facing the wrath (and abuse) of consumers, but when another disconnection next month is printed for Oumar (and it will be), this particular disconnector, being fully acquainted with the history of this property, will experience a standoff situation between conscience and greed; a clear conscience being far more rewarding than being richer by an ill-gained few rands. The rot in our society is overwhelming. Nevertheless, strong to the disconnectors.

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