

City tenant's billing ordeal

WITNESS 26 | 10 | 2020

Woman's electricity routinely cut off at council flat even though she's not in arrears



Manor Flats tenant Nela Oumar has been illegally disconnected almost every month since last year for a debt on the account of the previous municipal tenant. PHOTO: MOEKETSI MAMANE

NOKUTHULA NTULI

Msunduzi tenant Nela Oumar is at her wit's end in trying to get the City to stop disconnecting her over a debt owed by the person who previously occupied the municipal flat she now lives in.

"It's so frustrating because we have different account numbers and mine is up to date with the payments. I don't owe them a cent but I keep getting cut off for a bill of more than R251 000 that has nothing to do with me just because I live at that address," she said.

She has been cut off almost every month for more than a year and each time they disconnect her the municipality apologises and promises to sort it out, but never does.

The last disconnection was on Friday when she had to rush to the AS Chetty Building late in the afternoon before they closed for the day. "I was busy cooking when the contractors came to cut me off. I've stopped trying to argue with them because they work with the list that they've been given by the municipality so I don't blame them."

Oumar eventually got reconnected after 8.30 pm that day, but sometimes it took longer and she had to rely on neighbours to let her connect an extension cord so that she could use her appliances. "It's such an inconvenience and when I go there I'm in the queue for more than three hours at a time.

Whoever is authorising these disconnections obviously does not check properly."

As a municipal tenant one would expect that the City updates the details when someone vacates their apartment, but that obviously did not happen when Oumar moved into the Manor Flats in 2018. She initially went to the housing department and was referred to the finance unit to get her information updated on the billing system. "Every time I go there they tell me it's the system and that they didn't capture my new account on it, but they are using the same system to bill me every month and to give me increases for the rent," said Oumar.

She said she would understand if the surnames were the same but the previous tenant was a Chetty and the account numbers are also different.

After one of the disconnections last year the finance department gave her a letter that was supposed to be proof that the account number for the previous tenant was terminated in 2018. The housing department also gave her another one saying the matter of the old tenant would be handed over to the debt collectors and the interest amount that they put on Oumar's account would be written off.

Oumar says every time she sees the disconnection contractors in the area she knows she will also get cut off. They usually come around on the 15th and 16th of every month so she now knows not to leave home on those days because she has to prepare to make a trip to the AS Chetty Building.

"I don't want to reconnect myself illegally even though I know I'm not supposed to be disconnected. I want to do the right thing because you have to think about your relationship with God, but this is what I get for trying to do the right thing."

She said all she wanted was for Msunduzi to rectify this so that she does not have to spend another three or four hours standing on the queue over a debt she has nothing to do with.

"I go there twice a month because I don't get statements so I go there to get a printout and pay, then I go back again after I get disconnected."

Msunduzi spokesperson Thobeka Mafumbatha did not respond to questions regarding the matter. nokuthula.ntuli@witness.co.za

OUR VIEWPOINT CITY'S BILLING TRAGEDY

EST 1945
The Witness
(KwaZulu-Natal) October 26, 2020

Msunduzi's billing war against residents continues unabated, emphasised by two reports in *The Witness* over the past two weeks. In the first, a former resident who now lives in Cape Town keeps getting bills for a property that was sold and transferred years ago. Today, we report on the tenant of a council flat who gets disconnected nearly every month

over a debt she does not owe. If anyone should know that its tenants are paid up it is the municipality, and yet it is unable or unwilling to halt its reign of terror which cuts residents off at the most inconvenient times and forces them to rush off to prove that they are not in arrears. This defies the basic principles of justice, and bureaucratic competence.

Since the municipality is chronically unable to solve its own problems, it has turned to the Development Bank of Southern Africa to show it how to collect money. Among its tasks will be to "cleanse" the customer database (which sounds ominous) and meters and review tariffs. The billing system clearly does not work, and so this development should be welcomed. However, the municipality should place a

moratorium on disconnections until it has overhauled its systems and can be certain that disconnections do not target those who are paid up. It is hoped that the DBSA will urge Msunduzi to respect due process, and not summarily to cut off those who have a flawless payment record over a long period. It is brutally unfair to have one's electricity cut off for no reason, and

then have a scramble to explain oneself so as not to endure a weekend without power — a fate that befalls too many too often. Imagine the absurdity, as we report on page 1 today, of someone having to prove to their landlord, who faithfully collects their money every month, that they have done so and so should be reconnected, yet again. It's a tragedy and a farce.

'Achilles heel of Msunduzi'

WITNESS 5/10/2020

Administrator says the costly SAP financial system presented a huge dilemma to City

NOKUTHULA NTULI

MSUNDUZI administrator Seelo Duma has described the SAP financial system as "the Achilles heel of Msunduzi". Presenting a report to council last week, he revealed the municipality had already spent more than R251 million on the system, which was still plagued with problems.

Some of the challenges led to Msunduzi's failure to comply with the National Treasury guidelines on financial reporting.

He said the system was like "a weakness in an otherwise strong person. This is a weakness that is capable of pulling someone down."

Msunduzi migrated from the Promis system to SAP during the 2016/2017 financial year and appointed EOH to implement it. At the time it was believed that SAP would meet the requirements for an mSCOA (Municipal Standard Chart of Accounts) compliant system. mSCOA was part of the National Treasury's budget and reporting reforms aimed at improving financial reporting, and from July 2017 municipalities were expected to no longer prepare and submit reports manually.

Msunduzi parted ways with EOH in March 2019. Elements of the system to

SAP FINANCIAL BREAKDOWN

Project implementation (EOH)	R78,86 million
Support (EOH)	R42,84 million
mSCOA upgrade (EOH)	R8,09 million
Data Services	R2,20 million
Issue log and risk	R4,14 million
Project and change management	R9,61 million
Safe City	R10,16 million
Quality assurance	R41,61 million
Data migration	R8,83 million
Support (Nambiti Technologies) 2018/19	R10,28 million
Support (Nambiti Technologies) 2019/20	R32,36 million
Support (Nambiti Technologies) - 2020/21	R2,39 million
Total costs to date	R251,41 million
Under dispute (Msunduzi vs EOH)	R61,69 million
Total including disputed amount	R313,11 million

make it mSCOA compliant were, however, still outstanding.

The municipality decided to take legal action against EOH for uncompleted work and also for providing the municipality with an unworkable system.

"Summons are ready to be issued to EOH," said Duma, adding that some of the SAP modules that had not yet been implemented included grant management, customer relations, plant maintenance, integrated development plan (IDP), as well as budget and planning.

"The main worry is on the budget and

SAP challenges

- Incorrect billing as a result of errors in meter readings and estimates
- High level of reliance on consultants even for basic transactions and reporting
- Inadequate training or lack of assimilation to new technology
- The scratched out modules remain outstanding (never implemented)
- Both the Budget and Planning as well as the IDP Modules are key to mSCOA compliance; and
- Costs to date do not include the costs of litigation, which are unknown at this stage

Proposed remedial actions

- Introduce electronic methods of meter reading
- Ongoing training for meter readers including consequence management measures
- Management in the process of appointing contractor to implement outstanding modules and make SAP mSCOA compliant
- Re-evaluate the efficacy of SAP

implement the outstanding modules and ensure that the system was mSCOA compliant.

"Perhaps there's a need to re-evaluate the efficacy or the adequacy of this system, whether we bought a Rolls-Royce when we actually needed a Toyota Corolla. That is a question that we need to ask and that is the question that will make us decide whether we change the system and, if we do, we must bear in mind that all these costs that have been incurred will be lost"

Duma said it was a council decision but he understood that it was difficult one because of the investment already made.

"It's a Catch-22 situation because if you carry on pouring money on this thing, what assurance have you got that it's going to work with a little bit more investment? I don't think that we have that assurance that it's going to work, this Rolls-Royce"

He said council should consider asking the City management for a report on whether there was an assurance that SAP would ever work.

Councillors across political parties said they had been raising the issue of SAP and more particularly incorrect billing for years.

They said it was one of the contribu-

tors to the debtors book which hovers at around R4 billion.

ANC councillor Jabu Ngobo said: "We are caught between a rock and hard place because if you think about the amount of money that has been spent on SAP and then the thought of getting a new system. What would we do with all the money that's already gone?"

She hoped management would do what they told Duma about the appointment of a qualified service provider to sort out SAP.

Her colleague, councillor Sandile Dlamini, said the City must also do data cleansing.

"It's all wrong for us as council to bill and penalise people using wrong statements. That needs to be corrected. We can't say people should pay for what they don't owe the municipality. Let's bill people correctly then demand our money with pride."

He said council also needs to know who was billed, as well which areas were not billed, and that management must provide a report outlining its plan on how it intends to address the non-billing of residents.

"If we don't treat people equally then there'll be chaos in Pietermaritzburg," said Dlamini.

• nokuthula.ntuli@witness.co.za

Municipality is a law unto itself

WITNESS 5/10/2020

THE disconnection of consumers' electricity that was reported in *The Witness* confirms that Msunduzi Municipality is a law unto itself!

The latest incident (*The Witness*, September 29) of disconnecting a pensioner for over a week despite the fact that he has proof of payment, exposes the indifference of the bullies.

Conspicuously, the mayor remains paralysed to assist the pensioner.

Concomitantly, social media is abuzz with a lengthy message about a fed-up resident in the northern areas who was disconnected on a Friday afternoon despite having paid his bills well in advance.

Intriguingly, the resident was blocked on WhatsApp by the mayor when he was approached.

The Witness reported on September 28 that close to R93 million was raked in by a panel of debt collectors and R13 million was paid in commission to these debt collectors.

Surely there is an in-house department that should be following up and collecting the millions due?

Or is our municipality totally inefficient?

It would be interesting to know how much of the R93 million was raked in from the northern areas as compared to other residential areas.

At least one of the debt collectors is based in Gauteng and defaulters have to liaise with this company at their own cost.

Thank you to *The Witness* for continuously exposing the inefficiency and alleged maladministration of a litter-covered and pothole-riddled city of choice that has been under administration for a decade.

The same municipality wants to give away R15 million to a professional football club.

JAY JUGWANTH
Pietermaritzburg

Can I attach municipal property?

WITNESS 1/10/2020

NOTE with interest that the municipality is now attaching property for purposes of auction where the owner has not paid their due for four months. So I am left to wonder if I can put one of the municipality's properties on auction so that it can pay me my RS 123.67 plus interest, from November 2018. Despite sending regular e-mails I have had no response from the rates department. Up until recently I have been billed monthly for rates on my property which escalated to close on R2 000. Finally, a few months back I stopped receiving the incorrect rates account

but guess what, not a word about the money that is owed to me. Also reading *The Witness* recently that the municipality has a sizable amount of unclaimed money for services, which has to be refunded to property owners should they submit the necessary claim for refunds. Guess what again, no mention of rates refunds for people who have submitted claims regularly and have been to the municipal offices a few times to try to get their money back. I wonder if I can disconnect municipal services as a start?

ROD POTTER
Hayfields

Huge bill from the municipality

WITNESS 02/10/2020

REGARDING Norma Ford's letter regarding electricity bills (*The Witness*, September 25), I have been having the same problem since before lockdown. I was corresponding with a sensible person but he's disappeared now. Like Ford, I received some horrendous account suitable for a Red and Breakfast establishment and I'm a pensioner living on my own.

No one has read my meter. I refuse to pay this ongoing massive amount until the municipality can prove in a court of law exactly how it reached the amount. I do, however, like a good fight, always pay the current account, which to my mind is also massive considering I'm on my own. I have told them I'm sick to death of

paying for people who steal electricity. I also do my own meter readings now, but they still seem pretty high to me. Perhaps we're paying for more bodyguards for the "elite" who know. You would also think with all the outrage in one way or another, the account would go down!

A.C.G. VALENTINE
WITNESS/KOOL

Municipal must enable legitimate queries to be heard

I SEE that seizing defaulters' land (*The Witness*, September 28) is now part of the credit-control measures being enforced by Msunduzi Municipality. While I fully agree that defaulters cannot be ignored, the municipality has failed to create a route by which legitimate queries can be addressed. I again implore *The Witness* to solicit a response from the municipality regarding recognised queries. It is impractical to agree on any payment arrangement without dealing with legitimate queries

first, let alone embarking on a electricity disconnection plan! The Msunduzi Association of Residents, Ratepayers and Councillors has also expressed concern over the municipality failing to land an ear to residents. The other issue is the matter of ordinary that is owed to residents. I have expressed previously the need for accountability in this regard. Recently, an article appeared in *The Witness* declaring that Msunduzi is sitting with R30 million which is owed to

residents. While I was informed by Ms Nkomo that I will be paid, amounts owed to me before the end of September, my wait that has been for over half the year continues. Ironically, the A.S. City Building is named after an icon who fought for these very issues through the Combined Ratepayers' Association. Sadly, this building has now become a symbol of municipal despotism.

RIKESH ISHWARLALL
Bombay Heights

• Letter shortened.

The Witness OUR VIEWPOINT MSUNDUZI'S SAP SYSTEM

Est 1846
KwaZulu-Natal, October 1, 2020

HERE are few greater frustrations when having to deal with bureaucracy than to be told "the computer won't let me" (other than "the computer is down", of course). In the case of Msunduzi Municipality, the bleak reality is that the computer is definitely down, and most likely out for the count. The SAP software installed in 2016 to integrate the management of Msunduzi's finances is a top-of-the-range package that is in use throughout the

world. Ratepayers have not been impressed because the simple process of sending out accurate accounts on time appears to be beyond it. City administrator Seda Duma is of the same mind, and he has described the system as "the Achilles heel of Msunduzi". This is an understatement.

A municipality is nothing without revenue. SAP is at the centre of Msunduzi's ability to collect revenue. Without this function, there is no revenue, and without revenue, there is no municipality. And ratepayers are in no doubt that Msunduzi is the Achilles heel of Petermaritzburg. Msunduzi has passed the buck on who's to blame for the mess. It has already spent R251 million on the system, but claims that the company contracted to install it did not complete the job and has left behind an unworkable system. Whatever the merits of this argument, there are other pertinent factors. First, it is clear that the

skills levels in the municipality are not up to scratch. From the way Msunduzi has presented its woes, it clearly expected to take SAP out of its box and it would work, all by itself, when, as with all systems, someone would have to run the thing. The second, more ominous element to the debate is that, thanks to the Gupta leaks, we know that SAP paid R100 million to Gupta-controlled companies to secure software deals at Damshet

and Eskom. We know that state capture extends to every corner of the state, and municipalities have been complicit in grand theft of taxpayer money. They were also the prime agency by which the VBS fraud took place. So how did Msunduzi come to be saddled with this "Achilles heel"? Who got a brown paper packet to persuade Msunduzi to buy something that it may not have needed?

Owner angry after power reconnected

WITNESS 25/09/2020
NOKUTHULA NTULI

RATEPAYER Feroz Rassool has accused Msunduzi of acting like a law unto themselves after the City "illegally" reconnected electricity to his Mountain Rise property after he specifically asked them to remove the meter.

"As ratepayers we obviously have no say on what happens on our properties and we have to spend money of lawyers to get the municipality listen to us," he said.

Rassool made the request to terminate municipal services to the property last May, which was carried out in July when technicians were sent to remove the electricity meter.

"Shortly afterwards the house was reconnected again without my knowledge. I only found out when I drove by one evening and it was all lit up," he said.

Rassool suspected that someone at the municipality had been approached to reconnect the electricity, however, he said this was illegal since both the property and the account were in his (Rassool's) name.

He said there were ongoing attempts to evict a family member, whose presence on the property had stalled his plans to sell it or get tenants.

He said that was a separate dispute and I'm dealing with it, but it doesn't change the fact that the account is in my name so the municipality had no right do that reconnection.

"They also reconnected without any meter, which basically means that the municipality colluded with someone to steal its electricity."

Subsequent to his last August query about the legality and accountability of having electricity and water on the property without regulated meters one was installed without him being informed nor contacted.

Rassool said since that he had been back and forth to Msunduzi trying to get the matter sorted out as the City resumed billing him for the services since last September, with the latest statement arriving this month.

"It's well over a year since my signed municipal disconnection request and this account is still active and beginning to accrue yet again because the municipality decided to go behind my back."

He said that they obviously kept the account active because his relative paid for some of the months.

"He would have long moved out of that house if the municipality had just respected my request."

Rassool also wants the municipality to investigate who colluded to get the electricity reconnected as there were allegations that the instruction came from the office of the then mayor, Thembu Njilo.

However, yesterday Njilo denied knowing either Rassool or his relative.

Msunduzi spokesperson Ntobeko Ngcobo said the matter has been referred to the relevant department for investigation. "The account in question is being serviced and kept up to date."

"The municipality will be in contact with the owner of the property."

nokuthula.ntuli@witness.co.za

Spiteful and dysfunctional municipality

WITNESS 24/09/2020

LAST Saturday at around 11 am, our electricity at home was disconnected by the municipality.

I returned from town and found a notice in our post box consisting of our municipal bill and a disconnection of electricity notice.

After inspecting the bill, I saw that we had paid an estimation at the end of August which left us with a small balance in the "30 days" column plus the current outstanding amount.

For the past couple of months we have received no-bills from the municipality despite e-mailing it and requesting such bills several times.

Anybody inspecting our bills and payment history would immediately notice that we pay on a regular monthly basis even if we do not receive an actual electricity bill.

If the municipality had left the bill in

our post box before Saturday it would have been paid in full immediately and on time.

On a Saturday at 11 am there are no offices open and nobody available on a phone to assist.

This meant no electricity for us for the remainder of the weekend until we could make contact with the department on Monday.

This leaves me as an upstanding, paying citizen, really upset.

Not only is this council dysfunctional, corrupt and totally mismanaged but also spiteful!

One would think that it would be far more appropriate for the municipality to treat regular-paying citizens with a little more respect rather than like 'sitting ducks'!

DAWIE DE WET
Montrose

MUNICIPAL BILL NIGHTMARE

JACQUES Poirier's letter (The Witness, September 23) refers.

I have had the same problem three months ago. I received a municipal electricity bill for R3 811. Despite sending my reading every month, the municipality had estimated my usage as being five times more than I normally use!

I pay my account every month and will not pay for electricity that I have not used.

When estimating, surely the municipality should look back and see what the user's average usage is, instead of estimating a ridiculous amount?

My latest account also reflects an incorrect reading.

Trying to contact the municipality to speak to someone is a nightmare.

NORMA FORD
Prestbury

WITNESS
25/09/2020

OUR READERS WRITE

Dear Mr Mayor

EVERY time Msunduzi Mayor Mzimkhulu Thebolla is held to account, he scurries to cite conspiracy theories ("City man slams mayor", *The Witness*, October 2).

Thebolla now accuses ratepayer Logan Govender of having a handler and fulfilling an agenda; notwithstanding that Govender's complaints are factual and from his personal experiences of municipal incompetence and wastefulness. The mayor must admit that he leads a very inept municipality. In a municipality under administration for a decade, Thebolla was seen as "fit for purpose" to be the city's first citizen. One would expect him to know the shenanigans inside Msunduzi and focus on cost-saving initiatives.

Msunduzi administrator Scelo Duma has revealed that councillors are in arrears for over R500 000, while one councillor enjoys immunity despite owing the city just under R200 000. Despite having the privilege of settling their arrears in 90 days, the councillors disregarded the city's financial crisis. There are employees who are indebted to the municipality for almost R5 million, with one owing R345 000. Even Duma cannot fathom how these debts spiralled out of control. Significantly, no councillor or employee was disconnected or handed over to debt collectors. The mayor knows nothing about this, how

convenient. Then there is Govender, who was disconnected on a Friday afternoon, notwithstanding that his account was paid up. He approached Thebolla who audaciously advanced that he "tolerated" the ratepayer. To add insult to injury, the mayor blocked the ratepayer on social media. Mr Mayor, as the first citizen, you must be accessible to all. Blocking a ratepayer who contributes punctually to the city's coffers is most discouraging. Mr Mayor, ratepayers have for far too long tolerated financial maladministration, corruption and poor service delivery. At no time have you addressed the lack of service delivery, the chaos related to billing and the disconnections fraught with controversy. Your silence is not only ear-splitting but endorses Govender's assertion that the northern areas (predominantly Indians) are soft targets for quick cash from rampant disconnections. Mr Mayor, millions were written off in Sobantu while this "privilege" was never afforded to the northern areas.

Your scurrying to play the race card is simply you deflecting the truth. The revenue from the northern areas forms a thick slice of income for the municipality. However, the service is not equal to the rates we pay.

JAY JUGWANTH
Pietermaritzburg

• Letter shortened.

Please help, Mr Mayor

HONOURABLE Mr Mayor, since you have become the mayor of Msunduzi you have not been to the northern suburbs.

Before becoming the mayor you attended our meetings, assuring the business community and the community at large that you wanted to make things better for all, and you wanted to work together. You gave the northern suburbs hope when you frequented the area. Yes, Mr Mayor, at that time you did what you said and delivered.

Now, Mr Mayor, things have worsened in the area and we ask you to assist us and fix things. The northern suburbs have always been Msunduzi's cash cow and the residents are fed up. We don't get service delivery and neither do we get any upgrades.

Yes the people voted for the DA, and we all know it is powerless. Mr Mayor, our area is suffering with potholes, water and electricity outages, non-functioning traffic lights, unkempt municipal areas, water and electricity outages daily due to ageing infrastructure, and many more problems.

We know the municipality wants to enforce stricter measures to extort the northern suburbs once again for funding as the municipality is cash-strapped. Mr Mayor, our people have lost their jobs and it is an ethical dilemma now: whether to feed the family or pay the municipality. This is the reality of our area to be sold off due to defaulting on their bills. Mr Mayor please, this letter is in

VENOLIN GOVENDER
Northdale

• Letter shortened.

Response is 'beyond reason'

THE *Witness* article: "City man slams mayor" (October 3), refers. I know the writer Logan Govender personally as a resident of Ward 28. He is a man of integrity whose repute is beyond question. For the mayor to call Logan's letter a "personal attack, a political ploy" is beyond reasoning.

What is obvious is the mayor is deliberately avoiding the main issue, and that is the illegal disconnecting of Govender's electricity. Govender does not owe

any monies on his bill. Mr Mayor, you are aware that your finance department is dysfunctional. As a ward councillor I receive complaints daily from residents whose bills are up to date but they are disconnected. Or residents who have an arrangement to pay off debt but are still disconnected. And pensioners, some as old as 90 years, are being disconnected. Some residents do not receive their rebates on the electricity portion of their bills. No one in finance can explain why

never available. Mr Mayor, to insinuate that Govender has handlers is your ploy to shift focus from the issue, which is that you have a dysfunctional finance department. It's time to get off that high horse, remove the blinkers and smell the roses.

LUCKY NAICKER
DA councillor in Ward 28
Bomabay Heights