

WATER: National govt intervenes in PMB billing crisis

Msunduzi flouts tariff rules

THABISILE GUMEDE

THE national Water Affairs and Forestry Department regulation unit has intervened in the Msunduzi water crisis, following an outcry by city residents that they are being incorrectly billed for their water.

The Eastwood Community Forum and Vulindlela community groups met the department and Msunduzi Mayor Zanele Hlatshwayo in Eastwood on Saturday to air their grievances about water and sanitation services.

Research conducted by water service lobby groups has indicated that the Msunduzi Municipality charges the highest water tariffs in the province.

Community groups in conjunction with the PMB Agency for Christian Social Awareness (Pacsa) have been advocating for a tariff change for the past five years.

Sibu Khanyile, the Pacsa water project organiser, said their greatest issue with the municipality has been the implementation of the indigent policy and tariff structure, which communities say is in contravention of national tariff regulations.

According to the policy, if a household uses six kilolitres or less per month they get their water for free. If, however, a household exceeds six kilolitres a month, they are charged R29,45 for the first six and each additional kilolitre is charged at R9,75.

The department regulations state that a municipality cannot recover the price of the full six kilolitres if just over that amount

of R61 000, which she is unable to pay.

"We were paying for our water regularly and out of the blue our bill began to escalate until it reached this amount and we are unable to get assistance from the municipality."

Wood said that when she went to query the bill, municipality officials advised her to sell her home to pay for the bill.

Pacsa believes the municipality is in breach of national department regulations as the municipality uses a two-block tariff structure, although department regulations stipulate that municipalities should have three-block tariff structures, the third accommodating consumers who exceed 20 kilolitres of water.

The municipality may have also breached the indigent policy by using restriction washers and not electronic flow devices, meaning that households are restricted to less than 12 kilolitres, which they should be restricted to.

Khanyile said the 0,5 mm diameter hole in the restriction washers allows a flow rate of approximately 8,33 litres per hour (dependent on pressure, gradient and dirt particles in water). The regulation stipulates a flow rate of at least 10 litres per minute.

The Vulindlela community com-

plained that their connection fees are R650, whereas in urban RDP settlements the water connection charge is R66. The community also wanted clarity regarding the absorption of the previous Umgeni Water rural areas into the municipality. Msunduzi is the only municipality in the province that has incurred water arrears as the municipality is disputing the amount owed to Umgeni water.

Leonardo Manus, deputy director of technical regulation at the department, said their duty is to ensure that regulations are adhered to and that action is taken against municipalities that do not comply.

Manus said the department has been in consultation with the municipality and the communities concerned since 2005. "We commenced an investigation into the grievances in 2005 and found that all regulations were not complied with. Recommendations were made to the municipality regarding a change in strategy in their implementation of the indigent policy," he said.

Further investigations on how the indigent policy is being implemented will be conducted by the department, but the municipality will have to make a decision that will suit consumers without bankrupting the municipality.



PHOTO: SHAN PILLAY

Mayor Zanele Hlatshwayo with angry residents' water bills during a meeting over tariffs in Eastwood at the weekend.

Research indicates that six kilolitres is not enough to serve as a basic water requirement line,"

said Khanyile. Chrisilla Wood of Eastwood said she has incurred an exorbitant bill

over to municipal debt collectors. 21 551 households were handed

