

Educate and enforce

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Public participation is essential to bring about change in the municipality

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THERE has been continuing adverse public reaction to poor service delivery in Msunduzi, after 18 months of being placed under provincial administration. The public mood is that nothing has changed.

The Built Environment Support Group (BESG) is engaged in a process of working with communities and local municipalities who see benefits in "doing things differently", to realise the benefits of working together. Critical to that process is creating or improving spaces for public participation.

It was in that context that BESG hosted the Msunduzi Stakeholder Forum in January. We provided a platform for stakeholders from a wide spectrum of the local community to address key issues of service delivery and accountability, to both senior municipal players and officials of the Provincial Intervention Team.

Former mayor Mike Tarr closed the forum by expressing a hope that it would not end in a "nice lunch". Several people who attended the forum have since asked if that is in fact all that has happened. The question is based on the same despondency that "nothing has changed".

I had my first "get to know each other" meeting with Mayor Chris Ndlela recently. He is someone who listens and pays attention to detail. He regularly took notes. He does not have preconceived views, and if he does, he puts them to the test by asking direct questions. And he has a vision of civic responsibility that challenges the gripe culture



PHOTO: CAMERON BRISBANE
The big-stick approach: residents in France township are threatened with a R1 000 fine for illegal dumping, but the municipality does not operate a regular skip service for refuse anymore.

that characterises the current relationship between the administration and citizens and stakeholder groups.

It is becoming clear to most stakeholders that the provincial intervention has been more about cash flow crisis management, and the turnaround strategy was as thin as newly formed ice. What it did, however, was give the administrator sweeping executive powers, to the extent that, during Johann Mettler's tenure as administrator,

questions were asked as to whether having an executive committee was not wasteful expenditure.

What the intervention has also done is entrench a culture of responsibility, and non-performance — some of the very things that were flagged in Mettler's status quo report as major threats to the municipality. It is doubtful whether the administrator has made any inroads into one other critical disease in local government, and ours is no ex-

ception, corruption.

There are, to give the individuals concerned credit, some officials who have made huge efforts to turn around their line department functions, and who have made an impact. They deserve recognition.

Unfortunately, the impression held by the vast majority of stakeholders and the general public is that there has been too much attention given to high-profile suspensions — the outcomes of most of which have not been reported — and too little paid

to the systemic debilitation of service delivery as a result of mismanagement, fraud, inefficiency, and an attitude towards the public by front-line staff that ranges from dismissive to abusive.

During the provincial intervention, some very dubious decisions were made that have nothing to do with cash flow management or institutional change management. For example, the sudden prioritisation over an official queue of 16 000 households of a project for 25 000 traditional-authority area. Or the approval of an application to build a rival shopping centre directly opposite an existing mall in Hayfields, involving the rezoning and demolition of residential property, when there are hectares of prime commercial land literally around the corner on the former caravan park site.

This is not participatory democracy, nor even constitutional democracy. It is pure dictatorship, and undermines the very function of the officials and portfolio committees that are accountable to the public for the exercise of their statutory functions.

It is time for the provincial intervention to be closed. Hand over to the incoming municipal manager and chief financial officer as soon as is expedient, and in the meantime support and mentor the handover process. Most of all, let officials do the job for which they are paid, and be accountable for services they are employed to provide.

Returning to the mayor's chal-

lenge to citizens of the city, we all need to recognise that institutional change is necessary to make local government work. However, attitude and behaviour change is something that needs institutional support.

Let me recount an example when my wife and I were back-packing through Namibia, in 2001. I still smoked that terrible golden weed at the time, and threw a stompie on the road. Our driver admonished me, not because I hadn't made sure the ember of my cigarette was dead, but because you just do not drop litter on the ground, even if you are in a desert. The streets of Windhoek are spotless because everyone embraces a commitment to responsible citizenship.

So how do we make it work here? My response to Ndlela's challenge is to say you educate, then you enforce. We can help you both educate and enforce, but we do not have teeth as ordinary citizens, and the public cannot bring about the conditions necessary to stop our streets and garden refuse sites being abused as uncontrolled dumping grounds.

Once the conditions for genuine public participation are in place, the mayor can confidently say: "Citizens, you elected me to do what you want to see, now we all have an equal responsibility to ensure that it happens." It cuts both ways.

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