

Not the way to run a public service

The Witness feature page 9 CAMERON BRISBANE 13 March 2013

THE Witness (March 11 and March 12) quotes the Msunduzi municipal manager (MM) as saying that he did not need permission from the Executive Committee to go to the full council for his proposal to force prepaid electricity meters — and the cost of installing them — on the entire city.

The reason prepaid meters exist is for the benefit of those on a limited income who risk running up arrears.

The municipality proposes to force customers who do pay regularly — many of whom use the convenience of Internet or cellphone banking — to stand in a queue at a pay point, of which

there are a pitiful few.

There was good cause for the Speaker, as the champion of public participation in the municipality, to launch an investigation. Alas, it was all bark and no bite. The MM simply reverted to the full council to say that he did not need to consult. The move is a flagrant violation of Section 16(1) of the Municipal Systems Act, which requires that

“A municipality must develop a ... system of participatory governance, and must for this purpose —

(a) encourage, and create conditions for, the local community to participate in the affairs of

the municipality, including in—

“(v) strategic decisions relating to the provision of municipal services ...”

This latest move comes on the back of the overnight imposition of SMS billing, six months of estimated meter readings, barrages of complaints about incorrect billing, the failed recruitment of meter readers, and now residents having to read their own meters.

None of these initiatives have been subjected to public participation or even consultation. The MM has not explained how forcing customers to pay upfront is going to resolve the R711 million service-charge arrears and R100 million in loss-

es on existing prepaid meters, which was reported in November, when the prepaid meter story first broke.

The city needs robust debate on these matters if the administration is to restore public confidence in it.

As long as the municipality closes down space for such debate, it should expect its dictatorial behaviour to be challenged with oversight bodies such as Cogta and Nersa, and even the courts as a last resort. This is not a way to run a public service.

• **Cameron Brisbane is executive director of Built Environment Support Group.**

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