

'MONITORING STATIONS LYING IDLE'

City air quality

shock

Thami Magubane

ETHEKWINI residents are in danger of breathing toxic fumes, contracting deadly illnesses and being unable to sue because air quality in the city is allegedly not being monitored, environmentalists have warned.

Bobby Peek of ground-Work said many of the city's 14 sophisticated air quality monitoring stations were lying idle.

An undated letter from the Department of Environmental Affairs to the city said Wentworth, Southern Works, New Germany, Ganges, Alverstone, City Hall, Grosvenor, Warwick and Edgewood stations were not working.

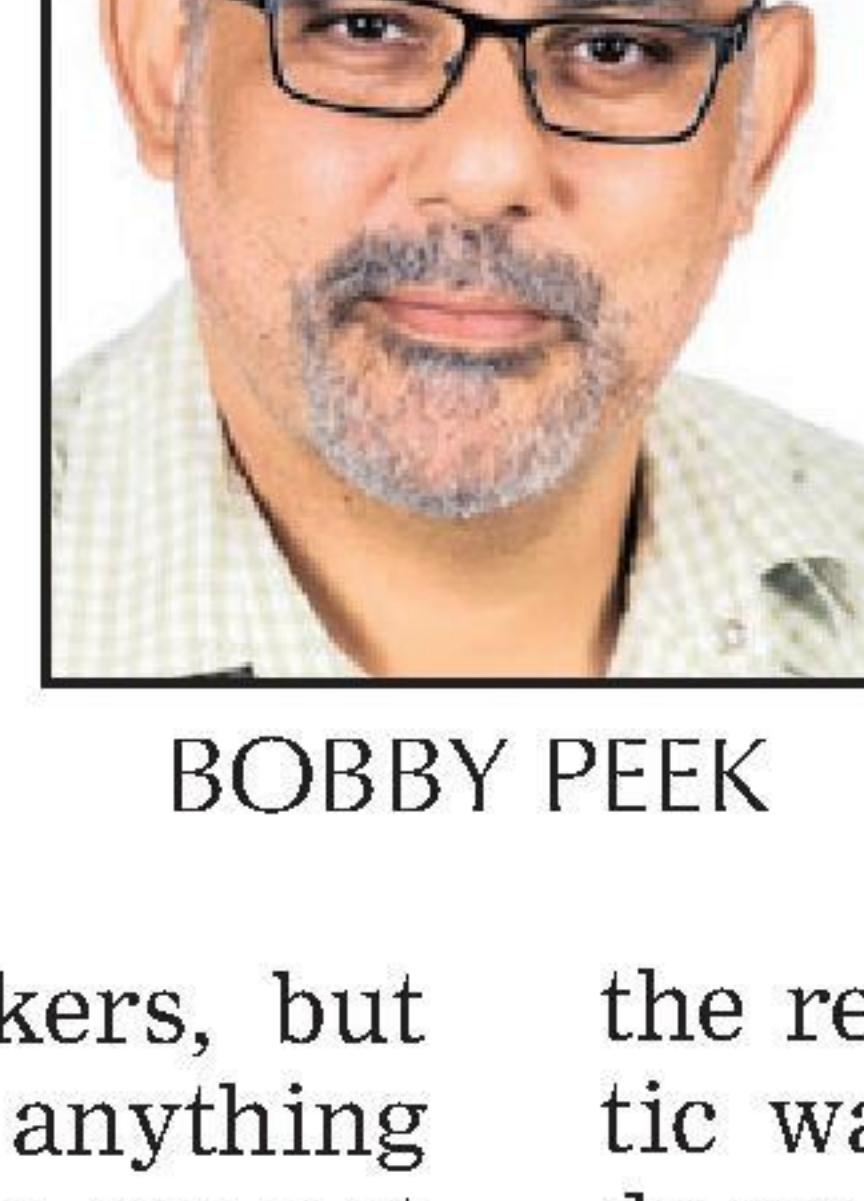
"There are workers, but they are not doing anything because the stations are not working," said Peek.

The issue of the air monitors has been cited by the South African Municipal Workers Union (Samwu) among a string of mismanagement issues crippling the eThekwini Health unit.

The Mercury understands the city has spent about R2.3million fixing some of the stations but many are still not working.

They are supposed to collect data detailing what pollutants are in the air, the most polluted areas and why they are polluted. This information is often used to identify and fine offenders.

Peek said he attended an Environmental Affairs portfolio committee meeting in Pretoria on April 4, where the



BOBBY PEEK

department reported that air pollution monitors in Durban had not reported any data since 2013.

He said the stations were neglected and did not get a basic service, and this could damage them permanently.

"It's like when you buy a Mercedes-Benz and you do not service it, two years down the line you will be forced to sell it because it will cost much more to repair because of the damage done," he said.

Peek said there were complex illnesses associated with polluted air, with South Durban being a case in point.

"There are issues of cancer, which is much higher than the national average, asthma and other respiratory problems," he said.

"With regard to the recent fire, a lot of plastic was burned. Plastic produces a dioxin which is one of the deadliest toxins. The trick about it is that you do not die immediately, but 30 years down the line you can have cancer and reproductive problems," he said.

Desmond D'Sa of the South Durban Environmental Community Alliance said failure to monitor air quality could prevent people from suing responsible industries.

"Some of the city stations are not working altogether and others are producing corrupted data."

"If, for instance, the air monitoring systems had been working during the recent fire, the affected community would be able to take legal action if they had information detailing what pollutants were in the air."

"The city would be obliged to provide them with that information," he said.

Sources within the eThekwini Health Unit said: "There are very few Air Quality Monitoring Stations that are working... maybe three or four, the rest are not working."

"The data on the air quality of the city following the recent fire should have been produced, but nothing will be coming through because they are not working despite R2.3 million being spent on them," said a source.

They said should residents sue because of the effects of the fire, the city could also become a defendant because of failing to monitor air quality.

The eThekwini spokesperson, Tozi Mthethwa, said all their monitors were producing the required data but some were under repair for various reasons, including wear and tear and vandalism.

She said: "Instruments do need to be serviced. Currently, we are also experiencing data transmission issues (network related) at a number of stations."

"There are also issues of theft of AC systems and damage by third parties (eg, a bus drove into a station) which need to be contended with. Other challenges include damage to fibre networks, the theft of AC systems, and damage by third parties," said Mthethwa.

Albi Modise, spokesperson of the Department of Environmental Affairs, confirmed there were 14 ambient monitors in the city and some of them were not working.

"Not all instruments in the networks are operational. This is a result of normal wear-and-tear since they were installed in 2004."

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