

Landfill has become a permanent problem for city

Every piece of waste legislation has been contravened by the site

COMMENT



MUSA
CHAMANE

THE New England landfill site can now be correctly referred to as a dumpsite as it has become a fixed or permanent problem for Pietermaritzburg residents.

In addition to being a hub for the city's waste, it has seen its fair share of mismanagement, corruption, political squabbling, murders, violence, and fires that produce toxic fumes and unfairly affect the entire city.

In 2002 as a student at the then University of Natal in Pietermaritzburg, I learnt that the New England Landfill site had approximately seven years left in its lifespan.

This means the site should by now have been closed, rehabilitated or repurposed around 2008, and replaced with a new site or an alternative approach to deal with the city's waste.

Fast forward to 2020, the site is still in operation and its extended existence is proving to be catastrophic, if not deadly, for the city.

The recent fire is nothing new. As one community member said: "This is now an annual event".

Landfill fires usually result from a very poorly operated waste management system. The open and uncontrolled burning of landfill sites and the waste therein poses many risks – especially to the environment and to human health.

The hazardous chemical compounds that are emitted affect people with compromised immune systems and those with sensitive respiratory systems, as well as young children and the elderly. In the short term, exposure to smoke can cause headaches, nausea, and rashes. Over time, regular landfill fires exposures can increase the risk of certain cancers and heart disease.



THE New England landfill dump site in Pietermaritzburg has seen its fair share of mismanagement, corruption, murders, violence and fires that produce toxic fumes, says the writer. | Africa News Agency (ANA)

This is because in the landfill smoke there are many harmful chemicals such as heavy metals, volatile organic substances and a particularly potent family of cancer-causing chemicals called dioxins and furans.

These particularly harmful chemicals have regularly been recorded in landfill fires (the chemicals are formed when organic waste is burnt in the presence of PVC, which makes up many common plastics), and are known to cause reproductive impairment and cancer in humans.

Additionally, chemicals such as arsenic, mercury, PCBs, lead, carbon monoxide, nitrogen oxides, sulphur oxides, hydrochloric acid – all harmful to human health – are commonly recorded in landfill fires. Some of these chemical pollutants can also end up in the ash after the fire and therefore

they can be inhaled as it gets blown in the wind.

SavePMB has advised residents that environmental health has been compromised and people in the vicinity of the fire must vacate their homes.

We are in general agreement with this statement if people are directly exposed and are breathing in smoke. If the smoke is not coming into their homes then the risk is decreased.

The ills that we see at this dump are the result of deliberate negligence of the landfill by corrupt politicians. The dumpsite should be covered with soil daily and waste materials should be compacted.

Dust suppressor trucks should always be there to make sure that dust is suppressed and can be utilised in case of a fire, but that is not being practised because the site is run by political appointments. In South Africa we have more than 100 landfills/dumpsites with waste pickers on site. There is no other dumpsite that constantly burns like the Pietermaritzburg one. We recently observed medical

waste, PPE, and hospital gloves at the site even though it is not a medical waste site.

In 2011, R21 million was given by the Co-operative Governance Department (Cogta) to the district to construct a materials recovery facility (MRF) in the city. An MRF is a waste sorting infrastructure that would have diverted recyclable waste ending up on the landfill by more than 60% – most materials would have been recycled.

This would have been a very good "forward-looking plan" by the district and Cogta. The money was received, MRF plans were designed, sites identified, waste pickers were trained and organised into a co-operative and all was going smoothly...

But as the system was about to be implemented, the district and local municipality had a fallout about the proposed MRF, and as a result it was never built. Cogta took back the unspent funds.

Similarly, the dumpsite's licence was issued by someone other than the appropriate government department – in normal circumstances the licence for this dumpsite would have been revoked.

Every piece of waste legislation has been contravened by the poor management of the site, however the site is still open. Communities of Hayfields, Sobantu, Lincoln Meade, and Mkondeni demand answers and that is why they have organised a protest against the landfill management.

Every Pietermaritzburger has had a dose of toxic fumes from the latest incident and it's a pity, especially for those who are in hospital battling Covid-19. They're battling to get oxygen into their system, and the landfill smoke makes this harder.

One Sobantu family had to be evacuated from their house due to prolonged exposure to smoke that led to their baby failing to breathe properly. And what about those poor people who do not have alternative accommodation?

Chamane is a waste campaign manager at groundWork, Friends of the Earth SA.