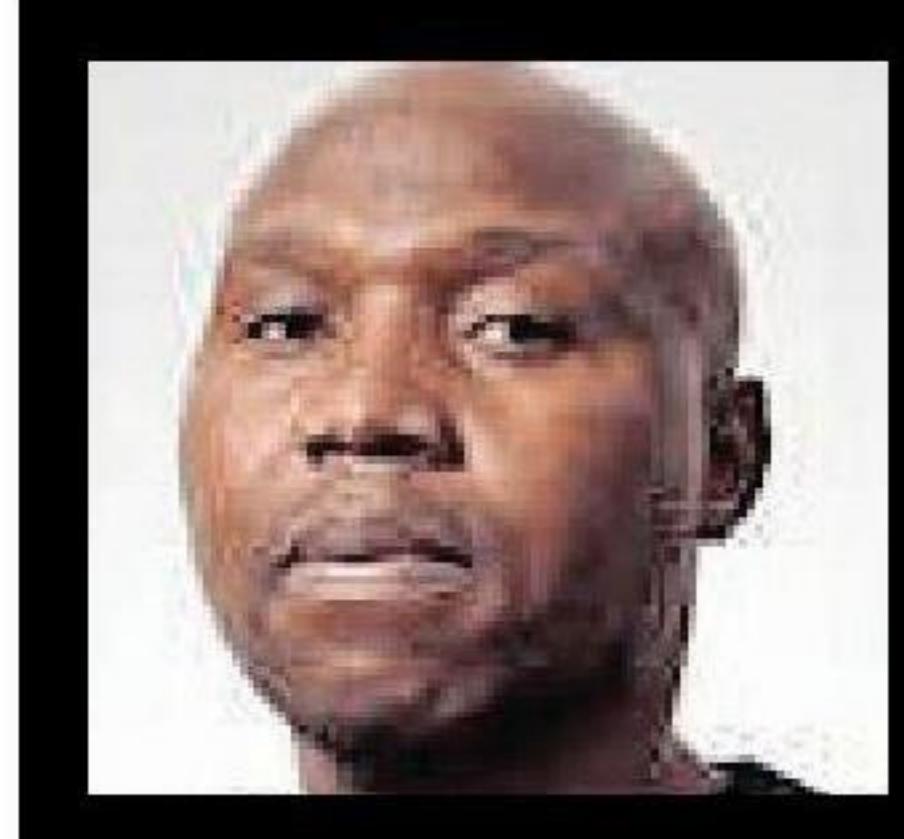


Landfill crisis now a matter before the high court

Numerous complaints levelled by Pietermaritzburg residents

COMMENT



MUSA CHAMANE

THE case against Msunduzi municipality on the management of the New England Landfill in Pietermaritzburg has finally reached the high court, thanks to the South African Human Rights Commission's (SAHRC) formal investigation into human rights and dignity impacts because of the dump.

The matter is set down in the Pietermaritzburg High Court for hearing today.

This comes as a result of the complaints levelled by city residents over fires that have been occurring regularly at the landfill because of poor site management. In April last year, the whole of Pietermaritzburg city was engulfed in smoke from the landfill fires which lasted for more than three days.

As a result, schools temporarily shut down for days, and residents became sick from the toxic smoke from the fires. The SAHRC subsequently received a number of complaints from Pietermaritzburg residents, and a protest was held near the site with a petition against the dump which was also handed over to the commission. The SAHRC then consulted the stakeholders who made complaints and acted on what had been reported in the media.

In September last year groundWork, the South African Waste Pickers Association (SAWPA), Shepstone and Wylie, and some of the affected residents met with the South African Human Rights Commission to provide more information and insight on the issue.

The commission also gathered grievances from Sobantu, Hayfields, Mkondeni, Scottsville residents, the



FIREFIGHTERS extinguish a blaze at New England landfill site in Pietermaritzburg last year. | African News Agency (ANA)

Save PMB organisation, various Ratepayers Associations and from civil society organisations.

To say the SAHRC was not impressed with the municipality's lack of urgency on this issue is putting it lightly. The commission was very concerned that official compliance directives that were issued by the Provincial Department of Environmental Affairs were ignored in their efforts to intervene and make sure that the landfill problems were resolved.

The case is of huge importance to South Africans because it could set a precedent for so many of the poorly managed landfill sites that exist in our country. There are more than 1 000 licensed waste disposal sites across South Africa, the majority of which are poorly managed.

We are also pleased that the municipality is planning to acquire a new site and close the current one. However, we hope that the new site will include a materials recovery facility (MRF). Waste pickers who drive recycling and

materials recovery in South Africa have previously protested, demanding the construction of a Material Recovery Facility (MRF) which was intended to be funded by Department of Cooperative Governance and Traditional Affairs (Cogta) in 2014.

Despite this funding being made available, the Msunduzi municipality refused to build it as a result of incompetence and corruption. Sadly, the money went back to Cogta. MRFs are very effective approaches to waste management and can go a long way in assisting the municipality in what has become a permanent waste management crisis in Pietermaritzburg.

The MRF was meant to create an enabling and safe environment for waste pickers, and also create an effective recycling system for the city, but that was all denied by Msunduzi Local Municipality without any sound reason.

Ideally, even the current site needs to be converted to a waste transfer station receiving only recyclable waste

materials, enabling an aggressive recycling and separation-at-source-of-waste system from residents and business that will ultimately lead to zero waste going to landfill.

This is a progressive modern way of dealing with waste.

Nationally, more than 90 000 waste pickers derive their daily livelihoods from waste. The installation of MRFs can facilitate the integration of informal waste pickers into the municipal waste management system.

Waste pickers should not be displaced but an enabling environment should be created for them to operate so that an economy based on waste emerges.

It is unacceptable in this day and age that vast tracts of land are used for archaic methods of waste burial without coming up with viable alternatives to manage waste. Zero waste is the only solution.

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