

City failing waste pickers

Msunduzi silent after calls for regulation – association

NOKUTHULA KHANYILE

WASTE pickers operating at the Pietermaritzburg landfill site say the death of Ntsiki Mhlakwane could have been avoided if Msunduzi Municipality had strict measures in place to reduce the risks to waste reclaimers.

Mhlakwane (56), a waste picker from Lesotho, was killed last Thursday when she was crushed by a compactor truck at the Pietermaritzburg landfill site.

Local spokesperson for the Waste Pickers Association, Nonhlanhla Mhlophe, said numerous calls for the municipality to regulate the site had produced no response.

“Waste pickers are injured by the compactor every three months and the municipality doesn’t care. We have even written letters requesting that the site be closed while the municipality formulates a plan to better control that environment.”

Mhlophe said that a system was needed to control waste pickers coming into the site.

“Every day new people come in. The new waste pickers do not have a basic understanding of the dangerous working conditions and they get injured on the site.

“I have personally witnessed a waste reclaimer being covered in waste without the landfill compactor operator being aware of it.

“I know of reclaimers being killed by refuse compactor trucks reversing over them — running them over at the working phase. It’s horrible. Others have been left paralysed because of this,” said Mhlophe.

She claimed that when they reported grievances to the municipality, they were told that waste pickers are not supposed to be at the site.

“Waste pickers should be integrated into the waste management systems. We want recycling to be done before waste reaches the landfill site.”

Mhlophe said the municipality had promised that the heavy machinery would operate far from where the reclaimers rummaged in order to reduce risks.

The South African Waste Pickers’ Association and groundWork are in favour of recycling facilities to be built by the

municipality to support wastepicking as a livelihood.

“Such facilities will provide safe working conditions in a more formal and organised manner. Waste picking is important to waste management and job creation, as it means items that can be recycled are making more landfill space for non-recyclables, and with such a high unemployment rate, it provides work for the most impoverished,” said Mhlophe.

Mhlophe said that in the case of Pietermaritzburg, the waste picker co-operative, Hlanganani maAfrica, had been urging the municipality to fulfil the funding requirements set out by the provincial Department of Co-operative Governance and Traditional Affairs funding mandate to build an MRF (Materials Recovery Facility).

“We have been waiting for about six years, however, inter-municipal conflict means that this project is not moving forward,” she said.

groundWork waste campaigner Musa Chamane agreed that Msunduzi Municipality had failed to control the site.

“Eight years ago we suggested that it must have a card system to control access.”

Chamane said that was never implemented.

“The numbers keep swelling. There are close to 1 000 waste pickers on site each day and it is a problem.

“It is a shame that someone has died because of the mismanagement of the site,” added Chamane.

Msunduzi municipality spokesperson Thobeka Mafumbatha said the landfill site is regulated by a waste licence issued by the Environmental Affairs Department.

“It must be noted that the machinery is at the landfill site to perform a function. The waste pickers are given guidance on the safety and dangers of the practice,” said Mafumbatha.

She added that the increase of waste pickers on the site was a concern.

“The incident that occurred was very unfortunate and our heartfelt condolences go out to the family of the bereaved,” she said.

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